



Drinks with Dead Poets: The Autumn Term

Glyn Maxwell

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I am walking along a lane with no earthly idea why...

Poet Glyn Maxwell wakes up in a mysterious village one autumn day. He has no idea how he got there – is he dead? in a coma? dreaming? – but he has a strange feeling there's a class to teach. And isn't that the poet Keats wandering down the lane? Why not ask him to give a reading, do a Q and A, hit the pub with the students afterwards?

Soon the whole of the autumn term stretches ahead, with Byron, Yeats and Emily Dickinson, the Brontës, the Brownings and Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Wilfred Owen and many more all on their way to give readings in the humble village hall.

And everything they say – in class, on stage, at the Cross Keys pub – comes verbatim from their diaries, essays, or letters.

Drinks With Dead Poets is a homage to the departed, a tale of the lives and loves of students, a critical guide to great English poetry, the dream of a heavenly autumn. Nothing like it has ever been written.

Drinks with Dead Poets: The Autumn Term Details

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Author : Glyn Maxwell

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From Reader Review Drinks with Dead Poets: The Autumn Term for online ebook

Julie • (LiteraryAlliteration.com) says

I've learned so much. This book has its own kind of magic, it's made me appreciate poetry and what it can do, which I thought was impossible.

This review was originally published on my blog, Literary Alliteration

I received an arc through netgalley in exchange for an honest review

?????????? / 5 stars.

I'm usually intimidated by poetry because I generally don't understand it. It has always been either hit or miss for me, and sadly mostly miss. Then came along this peculiar novel.

A professor, who shares the author's name, finds himself in a mysterious village, where he's expected to teach a poetry class. The story plays out over the course of the fall semester where each week is about a new poet. The poets, though dead, arrive in their corresponding week to perform a reading and have drinks with the class while answering questions from the students.

The first thing that was clear to me while reading was the genuine passion for poetry it consists of. It's not just a story, it's like experiencing the inside of the narrator's mind. Sometimes it can be confusing, especially if you're not completely focused on every sentence. That's part of the appeal. It's fascinating. The further I dived into the story the more I started to appreciate it for its strangeness and intensity. It possesses an enthralling magic that wraps itself around you, refusing to let go.

Drinks with Dead Poets has managed to change my perception of poetry. I may not comprehend the majority on a strictly fact-based level, but I've learned that it's much more than that. It's emotional and everything matters, not just the words but the breaks, the length, the rhythm, everything. I will never look at a poem the same way again.

Don't expect it to be light reading, there is an enormous amount of information, thoughts and theories, that demands to be pondered. I had to stop and take breaks throughout, because it inspired me and made me so excited about poetry, which I honestly thought nearly impossible. Don't go into it with any expectations. Let it guide you, surprise you, teach you and most importantly, let it inspire you.

Paige says

I received a copy of this book from the publishers in exchange for an honest review.

I have to admit, I find poetry quite the minefield and it's an area of literature that I'm not overly familiar with. I own the odd poetry book that I've read some of but I've yet to really understand poetry and love it in a way that many people do.

This is a great book for newbies to poetry. Mixing story with lessons and the addition of actually meeting the dead poets in each chapter meant that it felt less like a lesson, and added some fun into the story. Each chapter deals with a new poet, mostly well-known names and some that I hadn't heard of. The poetry is dealt with in an easy to understand way, with extracts from poems and other writings weaved into the narrative. Maxwell kept the majority of the quotes in context which helps with the comprehension of the narrative.

Some chapters I found easier than others, Poe for example was my favourite chapter, but I have read some of Poe's works before and as such I have an understanding of his work. The chapters I struggled with were those of the poets I'm unfamiliar with, but by the end of chapter I had more of an understanding of what was happening.

If you've got an interest in poetry pick this up, even if you feel like you don't understand poetry all that well. This book will teach you more while entertaining you.

Chanie says

Interesting concept - dull execution.

Clara says

Drinks with Dead Poets is a wonderfully eccentric book that defies categorization. Poet and teacher Glyn Maxwell is scheduled to teach a poetry class on a campus in a village that he doesn't recognize and can't remember coming to. Every Thursday until the end of term, he awakens in the same room in the same village to teach his class, each featuring a different poet's work. It so happens that the poets whose work Maxwell is teaching are all dead, and Student Services has booked them as visiting poets for Maxwell's classes.

Everything the poets say during their visits is taken verbatim from historical records--a fine conceit that gives context to their poetry and brings them, literally, to life. Maxwell (yes, he's not only the book's protagonist but its author too) brings a great sense of fun to his subject. He knows academia well, too, inventing an idiosyncratic array of students, teachers, and assorted bureaucrats whose behavior is both amusing and on the mark.

Drinks with Dead Poets is also a brilliant commentary on understanding poetry: how it works and how best to enjoy it. Using examples from the "visiting poets" work, these are its most spirited, enjoyable, and instructive parts. It's a book that I can see myself re-visiting more than once.

Beth says

DNF

Lydia says

I'd never heard of this book nor its author before. In fact, this book was given to me as a gift so I didn't even choose it for myself. What a gift it was though!

Such a novel concept: a man teaches a poetry class and all the dead poets turn up and explain their works. A great idea for humorous and informative profiles of history's greatest poets. The genius is in the fact that all the poets' spoken words are lifted right out of their own writings. What a concept!! I loved the realisation of this idea. By the end of the book, it felt completely normal for Lord Byron to rock up in a pub and give a group of students an exclusive seminar. Why not?!

Some references were a little obscure; maybe my poetry knowledge just needs a little work. It's certainly not a book for a complete poetry novice. That said, I'm no expert and I really enjoyed it. What's more: I learned loads too!

Domhnall says

I rarely write negative reviews – I prefer to just abandon a book and move on. But I was provoked by reading on the cover that “this is the best book about poetry I’ve ever read” (The Guardian), “among my indispensible books” (Poetry Review) and a “modern classic (The Spectator), and also so many enthusiastic reviews on Goodreads; it would be cowardly of me to shrink from the task. I need to warn you – don’t read this book. There are far better alternatives.

It’s a novel. Many wonderful poems are cited in it, and if I wanted a selection of nice poems I would look for one put together by Gladwell. A few are even written by Gladwell, a poet unafraid to risk his own work in this impressive company, keen to remind us at frequent intervals that he is indeed a poet. I have no doubt whatsoever that he knows his stuff and I turned to his book for inspiration. I did not turn to his book just to read a selection of nice poems. Having set the book up as a novel that is how it should be judged.

Gladwell does stop on occasion to make remarks about the poems he cites and he has some enlightening things to say. If he said more I would have appreciated that very much - I'd bet he could write a brilliant guide to poetry - but he says very little. He offers only snippets, starts to get interesting, then switches the subject. He leaves the poetry and returns to his novel.

In most chapters, Gladwell describes an exercise for aspiring writers of poetry and I imagine some readers will enjoy taking on these assignments. I can only assume these are the sort of activity one could expect on a creative writing course, since Gladwell depicts himself as a tutor for a group of students following his programme through a term. I am not sure I would want to have him for a tutor, since he describes his approach to teaching in such an offhand way. I am not sure that the exercises as described are terribly constructive, nor that his programme is in reality structured around any cumulative learning goals, but perhaps his attitude is based on an awareness that one cannot teach poets to write, one can only invite them to have a go.

In every chapter, a different (dead) poet turns up to offer a reading and to answer questions from the students of poetry. They are all significant figures from the 19th Century (plus Yeats) and there is a huge amount to be gained by considering things they have each said about the craft of poetry.

Unfortunately, they do not actually say very much in this book and the glimpses we are offered are

infuriatingly trite. Poets have not only said a great deal, they have also engaged in strident and outspoken disagreements with each other, with their predecessors and with their critics. For pity's sake there is a wealth of material to be picked over in a guide such as this – or alternatively, in a guide that rose to the occasion and did not flop like this flaccid text for lack of energy and drive. Take Coleridge's Frost at Midnight, which is used in this text: it was not just a jolly nice poem worth reading, it was also part of a serious assault on conventional poetry in its day, a remarkable and radical announcement of something new, a Quixotic tilt at windmills. There is just no sense of the sheer energy at work in the most interesting poetry of any period, then or now. The best poets do not just write poems – they write manifestos, they make statements, they demand attention, they provoke change. There is a reason why Coleridge was awake and hyper-alert at midnight and it is for the same reason that poets are described as the movers and shakers of the world forever, and no hint of that appears here.

None of these interesting things happen in this book because it continually switches from poetry to the absurd plot of a bland and unimaginative novel. It is not as if Gladwell even aspires to write novels rather than poems. Very early – on page 25 – a student says to him "I'm writing a novel." Gladwell responds: "Oh. I said that to my teacher and he called me a whore..." [p25]

Well, Gladwell has written one all the same and there is nothing the matter with the concept of teaching through a novel. [Among the very best and most challenging textbooks on management theory taught on my MBA course was a novel called The Goal, which I recommend warmly – though it is a bit lateral to our interest here!] In this novel, Gladwell is the tutor on a creative writing course for students wishing to write poetry, and through an Autumn term of twelve sessions, he introduces his students to a range of 19th Century poets and sets exercises for them. The creative twist is that the dead poets actually turn up to give a reading of their work and answer questions from the students. I doubt if any reader would have the least difficulty suspending disbelief for the duration of his novel, in order to bring dead poets back to life, and many readers would probably enjoy hearing how and why ST Coleridge invented the concept of suspending disbelief to answer the long running conundrum as to how drama works with its audiences.

What could go wrong with that perfectly workable plan is that Gladwell lacks the imagination or the technique to make it work – he is a poet but he is clearly not a novelist. He tries to sustain throughout the delusion that he has no memory of what or where he is, and that he is completely unaware of what takes place on the six days between his weekly teaching assignments. Where am I, who am I, what am I doing here, what is happening to me, the whole thing is dull. When he does wheel his dead poets onto his stage, he makes infuriatingly limited use of them. He seems content just to have name-checked them. All that tells me is that he has failed to summon up a sensible description of his imagined world and is floundering instead with tedious and repetitive nonsense. There is just about none of the necessary circumstantial detail that paints a believable picture for the reader in a well written novel. I suspect that readers who loved his book have used their own imaginations to fill in the huge empty spaces and given Gladwell the credit, which he does not deserve.

Even worse, the tutor in his novel is continually trying to use streetwise language and 'cool' mannerisms to establish credibility with his much younger students and that is pretty well always a terrible approach to younger people from any older adult, let alone from any teacher; it normally falls flat and it earns more scorn than respect. I further despise the assumption that the public, or students, or young people (whoever is the imagined target audience here) will only stick with his novel if it is insistently amusing and witty. Most poetry is not comical, much really great poetry makes us want to cry and I fail to appreciate why readers of poetry must be treated like the audience of a stand up comedian. Even stand up comedians can sometimes do an entire gig without being overtly funny.

The idea that great teachers behave like one of the kids is in my humble opinion false and also undesirable. There is even a clue to one reason for this in the novel, which makes reference several times to the notion that students are customers who buy their education and can choose to attend or not whatever session they choose. They are not customers, poetry is not a commodity, education is not a commercial transaction, and their payments could never purchase what Gladwell has to offer because they could never afford its true value and it is not his to sell – it is a common, shared heritage created by dead poets. If he wants to teach this heritage, we need him to act the adult.

Of course he is a good poet. Of course he writes many magical passages showing his genuine insight into poetry. He's just a rubbish novelist and this book is not on my list of recommended reading. There is so much out there which is far better. Try Richard Holmes on Coleridge for example.

So there you go. Sorry to be so horrible. I've even spoiled my own evening.

Albemarle says

I will never look at a blank page the same way again.

Poetry is close to my heart, so I was bound to enjoy this book from the get go. I was not prepared how much I would love it. It made me laugh, it made me cry, and it made me pick up a pen and write again.

I think this will go on my "read it over and over again" shelf.

Jim says

DNF

Timothy Urban says

I read this because I read On Poetry by the same author, a book I gave the full 5 stars to. A little masterpiece, in my opinion.

This one takes the same basic premise and expands on it. There's a wise teacher (the Author) who finds himself teaching a poetry class to mature students - this time on a dreamlike university campus somewhere rural. It's always Thursday for some reason, but we follow this weekly class for the full term, and the (dead) poets on the reading list actually turn up! and chat with the class.

It's a great idea, and the true cleverness lies in how the dead poets stay 'in character' as they interact with their modern audience, they say only things they were known to have said, so it all ends up being very illuminating both for the fictional classmates and for the reader.

Nancy says

Glyn Maxwell has written a quirky and challenging book that presents itself as a novel, but might more accurately be read as a guide to reading and understanding poetry. Maxwell's principal character greets the reader in a confused state: he unsure of where he is, or how he landed there, but he is leading a rather unorthodox (and unofficial) college class in poetry and his students experience a series of notable guests from Keats to Whitman to the Brownings and Poe.

The magic of this book is not that the guests are all notable dead poets, but it is in how each of Maxwell's chapters prepares the reader for what to listen for in each poet's work. We start to understand how (and why) a poet uses meter. We gain an understanding of how an idea is presented in a poem. And, we start to think about how the form and language influences what we hear and how we feel about the words.

I would love to be a student of Glyn Maxwell's, but it would be equally exciting to be teaching poetry using this book as a text. This is a quirky and challenging novel (and one that is rather slow to pick up steam), but it is a brilliant guide to understanding and appreciating poetry. The more I read, the more enthusiastic I became. It is, perhaps, a book that requires re-reading. I read it quickly to understand what was happening (and/or see IF anything was going to happen that would "clear the haze" created by the author) . Now, I can return to the book at my leisure, perhaps reading one author at a time to gain a better appreciation of them and their work.

NetGalley provided me with a complimentary copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Bridgett Brown says

I won this book in a Goodreads Giveaway.

I liked this book. Poet Glyn Maxwell wakes up in a mysterious village one autumn day. He has no idea how he got there—is he dead? In a coma? Dreaming?—but he has a strange feeling there's a class to teach. Then he sees all these poets there, just walking around. A dream come true, all the poets he loves right there in front of him.

Christopher Walborn says

Drinks with Dead Poets is a follow on from Maxwell's *On Poetry*. If you've read and appreciated that book, then you're well situated to read and appreciate this book. What it is not is a novel which functions primarily in terms of what happens to the protagonist, nor how the protagonist develops as a character. What it is, rather, is a fictional conceit which gives Maxwell the space to talk about reading and writing poetry without being godawful boring as he channels the perfunctory "poetry appreciation" class at your local community college. This is not a book of instruction so much as a demonstration of inspired reading. He dramatizes a creative reading experience, full of imaginative association and with a sensitivity to the fertility of words and rhythms. And he gives us an approach to "the greats" free of solemn pageantry or stultifying veneration. Do not read this book to find out what happens. Read this book to see how a creative mind reads.

January Gray says

I really wanted to like this book and I tried several times, but it did not grab nor hold my attention. Maybe it's just me?

Shirley Revill says

This book should be included on everyone's bucket list, it is awesome.
I enjoyed every word that was written on the pages and felt a sense of loss when I finished the story.
Will be reading this book again as I enjoyed it so much.
Thank you to Goodreads and Oberon books for giving me the chance of reading this wonderful book.
It was really appreciated.
