

## Lifesaving Poems, reviewed by Jade Craddock of nudge-book.com

Given its title, *Lifesaving Poems*, I was expecting Bloodaxe's new anthology to be in the same vein as its wonderful *Staying Alive* trilogy, but a quick glance at the blurb reveals that this new anthology is something different. Following on from Seamus Heaney's question as to how many poems can affect one across a lifetime, editor and poet, Anthony Wilson, brings together in this collection the poems that have made a mark on him.

I was immediately taken with this idea – a sort of personal anthology of all of the poems that mean something to an individual and it struck me as something that readers can take up themselves – how many times have you read an anthology and questioned the selections or wished for a particular poem to be cut or included? But I was also struck by the idea of a poetic soundtrack to one's life, the way in which certain poems may have defined a certain moment or period in one's journey and how you can trace a life through these poems.

*Lifesaving Poems* is therefore a very personal collection – one man's life seen through the poems he has admired. And unlike ordinary anthologies where readers may challenge the selections, this is a very different experience, for it is Wilson's poetic journal. The choices therefore are all subjective, but all significant to Wilson, and as readers, part of the attraction in this book is seeing those choices and understanding their motivation. It's a really interesting experience as such, as whether you like the poems or not becomes largely immaterial, although of course it's nice to find poems you enjoy and that perhaps can become part of your own poetic journal. And there were certainly a number of poems that were new to me and that I connected with, including Kate Bingham's 'Things I Learned at University', Maura Dooley's 'Mansize', Lawrence Sail's 'The Lack of You', Laura Apol's 'The Switch', Emily Riall's 'Duty Psychologist', Sharon Olds' 'Looking at Them Asleep', George Messo's 'The Beautiful Apartments', Patrick Kavanagh's 'Wet Evening in April' and Ann Gray's 'mercifully ordain that we may become aged together'.

And throughout, Wilson helpfully points readers in the direction of poetic works by his chosen writers for them to discover further and potentially find their own personal poetic connection. Also significant was that whilst Wilson chooses some of the more established names in poetry – Thom Gunn, Seamus Heaney, Sylvia Plath, Carol Ann Duffy – he does not necessarily opt for the obvious choices. His is not an anthology of the definitive or classic poems of literature, simply those that mean something to him and it's an important statement on how poetry should be received and understood.

Too often poetry has felt marginalising for some because of its prescriptiveness, that such and such a poet or poem is the example par excellence of what poetry should be and what we as readers should enjoy. But Wilson's approach attests to the fact that there is no right or wrong answer in poetry, though a poet or poem may be revered, what matters most is how a poem affects a reader. As Wilson outlines in his introduction, quoting Billy Collins: 'Good poems are poems that I like.' And often this

message has been lost, but Wilson here brings it to the surface and in doing so encourages readers to find their own poetic landscape.

Wilson's anthology does sometimes get bogged down by the commentaries that follow the poems and as a result the poems lose some of their impact. But really what I think this anthology does best is to place the importance on the reader and define poetry as something personal and relevant that makes it accessible to everyone. In many ways the anthology works best as a point of departure for individual readers to explore poetry and develop their own journals or similarly for reading groups to share their choices. Whilst the anthology is something very personal, the effect is universal.

Jade Craddock  
Personal read 3  
Group read 4

Lifesaving Poems – A Bloodaxe Anthology

<http://www.nudge-book.com/blog/2015/11/poetry-lifesaving-poems-a-bloodaxe-anthology/>