



Collected Poems

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The *Collected Poems* of James Merrill makes available--in a handsome, even plush edition-- the first extensive compilation of Merrill's work since the poet's death in 1995. Apart from his juvenilia and the epic four-part poem, *The Changing Light at Sandover* (1982), practically everything else is here: all of the ten trade volumes, of course, along with poems from *The Black Swan* (published privately, 1946) and *The Yellow Pages* (1974), a collection made up of poems Merrill excluded from earlier volumes. Editors J. D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser have also included twenty-one translations and forty-four other poems, some of them never before published, gathered from magazines and special editions. The result is certainly a weighty book, but more than that, it is a cornucopia of poetic delights that will reaffirm Merrill's position among the greatest of twentieth century American poets.

Traversing these pages, one expects to be reminded of the sheer linguistic skill embodied in his lyrics, reminded of his urbanity and wit (words no critic can seem to avoid using), and his sheer sense of style. He was, after all, an acknowledged virtuoso of form and music, gifted with an extraordinary ear and capable of exquisite small touches as well as grand operatic gestures. But the surprise comes from recognizing--beyond the dazzlingly rendered surface--the depth of his insight, the penetrating and unflinching gaze he directs at a whole range of human experience. And while he does write about a broad spectrum of things (not, it should be said, about politics, an area in which he famously professed himself uninformed and uninterested), he returns again and again with irresistible effect to human relationships in what he called "his chronicles of love and loss." It is these love poems that most readers will find endlessly rewarding for the way they blend nonchalance and gravity, the artful shifting of tone deftly registering the shifting passions of the heart.

A handful of poems from the last year of his life testify to the fact that, even in his illness, the lyric instincts were still intact, perhaps even more finely honed. As with the work in the posthumously published volume *A Scattering of Salts* (1995), these poems are ravishing in their simplicity of statement and depth of feeling, as if Merrill no longer felt the need to show off his fluency and brilliance and was content to shape his world in cadences and images of the utmost naturalness.

No doubt at some point there will be a *Complete Poems of James Merrill*, but until that day, this volume reckons to be the authoritative edition, the place to encounter one of the most prodigiously talented poets in a lifetime's worth of work.

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