Eliot's poetry ranges from the massively magisterial (The Waste Land), to the playfully pleasant (Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats). This volume of Eliot's poetry and plays offers the complete text of these and most all of Eliot's poetry, including the full text of Four Quartets. Winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Eliot exerted a profound influence on his contemporaries in the arts generally and this collection makes his genius clear.

**Personal Review: Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950 by T. S. Eliot**

Poetry was never my forte. Though an English major and aspiring writer, I had always preferred novels and the occasional short story. Although modern prose certainly has its fair share of ambiguity - William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, and William Burroughs come to mind - poetry seemed to be
the written equivalent of a Jackson Pollack painting. The literary landscape was apparently strewn with eccentrics reaching into the language, pulling out random words, throwing them at a sheet of paper, and seeing where they stuck. It is truly ironic that I finally overcame this aversion when I was introduced, in an English course during the fall of my sophomore year of college, to the one of the most impenetrable poems of them all: T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land."

I don't remember now, but I think I was rather horrified at first. Not only was it a long poem, it was also stuffed foreign languages and obscure literary references. I suppose it was as much the instructor as Eliot's genius that finally won me over. We had vehement political disagreements, but this particular individual was an excellent professor who truly did justice to the Modernist movement. "The Waste Land," I slowly realized, was a true masterpiece. The blend of the surreal and the mundane into a waking, blasted dreamscape; whispers of past grandeur adrift in the disillusion and decay of the present; the starkly beautiful imagery - I had read many novels, but none that affected me as profoundly as this poem.

I still cannot truly define what it is that makes Eliot so unique in my experience of poetry. Somehow, in some way, he managed to combine the abstraction of a Picasso with post-WWI trauma to capture the mood of a shocked society. Eliot introduced the Modernist rejection of realism in art and prose to a genre already known for being intangible and up in the air. Eliot's poetry is reminiscent of the dissonance and atonality of a Stravinsky piece: jarring at times, seemingly meaningless, felt rather than concretely understood or identified. His poems simply give rise to a moment or an emotion in a manner that makes perfect sense without the candor of prose. It is as though his metaphors and images were instinctive rather than intellectual. I honestly cannot adequately explain it. All I can offer is an Emily Dickinson quote (another poet I have come to enjoy since discovering Eliot): "When I feel as though the top of my head has been taken off, I know that is poetry."

(In other words: yes, this book is highly recommended.)

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