A vibrant anthology and accompanying CD that revive a great American tradition: the joy of reciting poetry aloud. This lively, abundant book is distinguished by its focus on hearing poetry read aloud. Robert Pinsky, beloved for his ability to bring poetry to life as spoken language, has collected poems that sound marvelous in a reader’s actual or imagined voice. Pinsky has organized the book into sections with brief introductions that emphasize the attentive, intuitive, and reflective process of listening to poetry. This structure provides an implicit, generous definition-by-example of poetry itself: beginning with “Short Lines, Frequent Rhymes” and “Long Lines” and proceeding through fundamental themes such as “Love Poems,” “Odes, Complaints, and Celebrations,” and “Jokes, Ripostes, Parodies, and Insults.” Essential Pleasures gives a fresh setting to traditional favorites, including poems by William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, and Robert Frost, placed among contemporary poems by John Ashbery, Louise Glück, Yusef Komunyakaa, and many others. This is an inviting and distinguished collection and an essential book for every home.

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My Personal Review:
Most poems should in fact be read aloud. Part of the power of poetry is in the spoken word, the sound that reverberates around the head and through the heart and mind. Poetry is in fact a non-linear expression that engages more than the denotative sense of words. It is a way of achieving through various poetic devices: allusion, alliteration, consonance, rhythm, rhyme, sound and even typography, a depth of meaning and experience not possible from mere prose.

Still it is true that some poems sound better read aloud than others, and Robert Pinsky, U.S. Poet Laureate 1997-2000, has come up with a
collection of some of the best ever written, designed to please both ear and mind.

The organization is in seven parts. Part I features "Short Lines, Frequent Rhymes," e.g., Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"; Robert Frost, "Dust of Snow"; Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Spring and Fall"; Edgar Allan Poe, "Fairy-Land"; five by Emily Dickinson, and twenty-six more. Notice that for the most part the selected poems are not necessary the poet's best or best known. And perhaps the greatest accomplishment in English that might fall under the heading of "Short Lines, Frequent Rhymes," namely Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" doesn't appear perhaps because of its length. I would have liked to have seen included e e cummings's "anyone lived in a pretty how town."

Part II "Long Lines, Strophes, Parallelisms" features the first three chapters of Ecclesiastes; "When You're Lying Awake" from W.S. Gilbert; Allen Ginsberg's inspired musings on Walt Whitman, "A Supermarket in California"; a couple from Walt Whitman and fourteen others. In his introduction to this part, Pinsky presents some thoughts of how stanzas might break down, how lines might be divided and how the energy and sense of a poem might thereby be affected.

Part III is "Ballads, Repetitions, Refrains," an eclectic presentation including Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky"; Julia Ward Howe's "Battle-Hymn of the Republic"; Pinsky's own "Samurai Song"; Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Miniver Cheevy," etc., and this famous anonymous gem:

Western wind, when will thou blow,  
The small rain down can rain?  
Christ, that my love were in my arms  
And I in my bed again!

Part IV: "Love Poems" includes Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach" with its beautiful turn to open the last stanza: "Ah, love, let us be true/To one another!..."; Robert Herrick's "Upon Julia's Clothes"; Andrew Marvell's famous "To His Coy Mistress"; something from Sappho, three sonnets from Shakespeare, and many more.

Part V gives us "Stories" of which my favorite is "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot which Pinsky rightly sees as more of a story poem than a love poem; Robert Browning's chilling "My Last Duchess"; Shelley's cautionary tale, "Ozymandias"; Wilfred Owen's take on that old lie, "Dulce Et Decorum Est"; Ernest Lawrence Thayer's popular "Casey at the Bat"; and thirty-five more.

Part VI is entitled "Odes, Complaints, and Celebrations" and it features William Blake's "The Tyger"; which is a celebration of sorts; Coleridge's beautiful opium dream "Kubla Khan"; "Ode on a Grecian Urn," "Ode to a Nightingale," and "To Autumn" from Keats; and many others.
In Part VII Pinsky gives us "Parodies, ripostes, Jokes and Insults" including Eliot insulting himself in "How Unpleasant to Meet Mr. Eliot" while parodying Edward Lear's "How Pleasant to Know Mr. Lear" (also included); and some thirty-five more. Here's Theodore Roethke's joke on the square entitled "Academic":

The stethoscope tells what everyone fears:
You're likely to go on living for years,
With a nurse-maid waddle and a shop-girl simper,
And the style of your prose growing limper and limper.

Pinsky provides an introduction to each part. There's a CD included with the book in which Pinsky reads twenty-one of the poems including "Ode to a Nightingale," and Milton's "Methought I saw my late espoused saint." I must observe that while Pinsky reads very well and it was a pleasure to hear him, he might want to redo his reading of Emily Dickinson's "The Soul selects her own Society" since he has the wrong meaning of "present" as evidenced by his pronunciation "prez'ent" instead of "pri-zent'" with the accent on the second syllable. The sense in the poem

The Soul selects her own Society--
Then--shuts the Door--
To her divine Majority--
Present no more--

Unmoved--she notes the Chariots--pausing--
At her low Gate--
Unmoved--an Emperor be kneeling
Upon her Mat--

I've known her--from an ample nation--
Choose One--
Then--close the Values of her attention--
Like Stone--

is that it is no use to present to her anymore since she is "unmoved" and has closed the Values of her attention--/Like stone--." (NOT that her divine Majority is no longer present.) The sense is that of the Soul as a kind of exalted royalty that one might present before.

This quibbling aside, Pinsky has put together a most interesting and entertaining poetry experience, one that I highly recommend.

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