



The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems

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William Stafford (1914-1993) was an earnest, perceptive, and often affecting American poet who filled his life and ours with poetry of challenge and consolation. *The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems* gathers unpublished works from his last year, including the poem he wrote the day he died, as well as an essential and wide-ranging selection of works from throughout his career. An editorial team including his son Kim Stafford, the poet Naomi Shihab Nye, and the poet, translator, and author Robert Bly collaborated on shaping this book of Stafford's pioneering career in modern poetry. The poems in *The Way It Is* encompass Stafford's rugged domesticity, the political edge of his irony, and his brave starings-off into emptiness.

The Way It Is: New and Selected Poems Details

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Emmett Moore says

I loved Stafford. His poetry delivers like drinking water: you don't realize how much you needed it until you've had your fill. I appreciate how short and yet substantial his works are; it starts to feel like beads on a necklace after a time, with each one different, and yet all of them speaking to the same big question.

Jim says

Another book I'll have on my "currently-reading" shelf forever. Poetry--you can't just dash through it and if it is good you have to read it more than once. I love lines like this: "A voice within my shadow wakened me".

Russ says

His development as a poet and person is amazing. his words are so soft --yet his poetry is a comforting hand as you lay on the ground..One of the most gentle and gifted poets of all time.Truly a man of peace

Cynthia says

These are among the most accessible poems I have ever found. I feel like some of them have been written just for me. I am happy to have discovered William Stafford finally...and wonder how I missed him before! This collection includes poems he wrote in the last year of his life, including the last day of his life. Lovely preface by Nye.

Jj says

"Right has a long and intricate name./ And the saying of it is a lonely thing."

Harold Bowes says

This is the best introduction to Stafford, a great overview, and it includes a section entitled "There's a Thread You Follow," with a selection of 46 poems written the year of his death, sequenced according to date written. His practice was to write a one poem per day. His last poem, "Are you Mr. William Stafford?", will break your heart.

Dean says

Just outstanding. Unpretentious, thoughtful, simple, excellent poetry.

k8inorbit says

a wonderful compilation of stafford's work including each poem written the last year of his life. (he always tried to write a poem a day, so that's a decent bunch.)

stafford is one of my favorite poets, this collection manages to give you his life's work, plus a whole slew of new things that'd he'd just started putting down on paper. it's hard to say which bunch i enjoyed more.

Mark says

This is the first book I have finished for My Two-Thirds Book Challenge.

Sara picked this book up at the lovely Defunct Books in Iowa City. It is a nice used book store that sits atop The Red Avocado vegan restaurant. Two great places in such proximity!

At 268 pages, there are a lot of poems in this book, which cover a 36-year publication history (1960-1996). It even includes the poem he wrote on the day he died.

I quite enjoyed this book, copied out several poems and a handful or two of great lines to use as prompts, read several to Sara, and generally pondered what Mr. William Stafford was like as a human being.

The one possible drawback to these poems is that there are simply too many of them to digest at once. The reader can discern one or more minor shifts in Stafford's work across time* which makes it a bit more difficult to get a grasp on him at any specific time. But honestly, this is a very small thing as his shifts are never very large and have more to do with his moving across parts of the country and with the normal shifts in theme and voice that a poet encounters as they age.

These poems accompany one as well as would a wise, world-observant, loquacious, and avuncular (but frequently solitary) companion who knows how to give one all the space and time one needs to grow just as wise and world-observant. He never gets in your way, never obstructs your view, doesn't tell you what to think or even what to observe. *The Way It Is* is not a prescription but a description, and it winds its way through the whole volume and not simply the single short poem that bears that title. In fact, lines and phrases quite similar to "the way it is" are peppered throughout the poems of this volume.

Love, the land, family, community, death, aging, historical events, nature, academia, and writing are only some of the many topics of these hundreds of poems.

In many ways I wish that I had taken a bit more time with these poems, that I had let them sink in more. Although, I am envisioning rereading them in the not-so-distant future as a one-poem-a-day meditation over the course of a year plus (there are approx. 400 poems). My version of a bible chapter a day, if you will.

*My biggest gripe with this book is its arrangement. The approximately 400 poems were selected from

"some three thousand poems published by William Stafford in either journals or in the sixty-seven volumes from *West of Your City* (1960) to *Even in Quiet Places* (1996), and from the poet's Daily Writings, with special attention to those of the last year of his life" (253). Great so far, but then:

"The volume is organized as follows: recent poems in the first section; a second section selected from the six volumes collected by HarperCollins in *Stories That Could Be True* (1977); a third section of poems published by other publishers, mostly in limited editions; and a fourth section selected from the poet's last three HarperCollins volumes, *A Glass Face in the Rain*, *An Oregon Message*, and *Passwords*" (253).

Who does that kind of crap? Oh, yes. Poetry editors. Idiots! To show you the order in which I read these poems, as chronological as possible, here is the listing we constructed to do so:

p. 60 1960
p. 77 1962
p. 103 1966
p. 120 1970
p. 131 1973
p. 49 1977
p. 187 1982
p. 149 1983
p. 208 1987
p. 231 1991
p. 155 1992
p. 177 1980-1993
p. 3 1992
p. 24 1993
p. 166 1996

Simply astonishing!

All arrangement issues aside, I *truly enjoyed this book* and look forward to revisiting it and more of William Stafford's work.

William Stafford at The Poetry Foundation

I will leave you with an excerpt from "An Afternoon in the Stacks"

...
.... When this book ends
I will pull it inside-out like a sock
and throw it back in the library. But the rumor
of it will haunt all that follows in my life.
....

The Way It Is (235)

Grady McCallie says

A friend whose reactions to the world I particularly admire posted a poem by William Stafford online recently; that was the first I'd heard of him. His collected poems mostly fall within a distinct emotional terrain - part stoic, part melancholy - and within it, they are wonderful. Stafford published his first book of poetry at age 48, and many of his poems focus on memories of his parents, aging and retirement, or how we live in the presence of transience and loss. His language is resolutely simple, often warm; natural forces are profound and often generous. A few of the poems reflect Stafford's pacifism, but most pose moral rather than political questions.

Here's one short poem, titled, 'At the Grave of My Brother: Bomber Pilot' (p15):

Tantalized by wind, this flag that flies
to mark your grave discourages those nearby
graves, and all still marching this hillside chanting,
"Heroes, thanks. Goodby."

If a visitor may quiz a marble sentiment.
was this tombstone quarried in that country
where you slew thousands likewise honored
of the enemy?

Reluctant hero, drafted again each Fourth
of July, I'll bow and remember you. Who
shall we follow next? Who shall we kill
next time?

and another, titled 'Over in Montana' (p167):

Winter stops by for a visit each year.
Dead leaves cluster around. They know what is
coming. They listen to some silent song.

At a bend in the Missouri, up where
it's clear, teal and mallards lower
their wings and come gliding in.

A cottonwood grove gets ready. Limbs
reach out. They touch and shiver.
These nights are going to get cold.

Stars will sharpen and glitter. They make
their strange signs in a rigid pattern
above hollow trees and burrows and houses -

The great story weaves closer and closer, millions of
touches, wide spaces lying out in the open.
huddles of brush and grass, all the little lives.

A final aspect of Stafford's poetry - not captured in either of these two poems - is his wit, which shows up most often in a final phrase, or even just a parenthetical, that turns the rest of the poem on its head, or re-orientes it in a way that exposes human vulnerability. This will be a collection to acquire and read regularly.

Ian says

The collection truly conveys the scope and power of Stafford's poetry. Many of the poems in this collection have been widely anthologized, but the book is a great to explore the many subtleties of Stafford's writing. Stafford's work is immediately accessible and devastatingly tremendous in its simplicity.

Karen says

Stafford's writing while direct and plain is rich with observation and understanding of life. This is a book to return to again and again over the years, and I suspect find new meanings each time. Stafford's humility and love of nature shine in his writing. While they are different, as a fan of Mary Oliver I'd also recommend Stafford.

Sherry Chandler says

After nearly a decade of unjust war, torture, and human rights violations on the part of our government, I find myself exhausted of outrage and with little belief that any action of mine can cause any meaningful political change.

At such a time, I come to William Stafford as to a refuge.

Take, for example, "Something to Declare"

They have never had a war big enough
to slow that pulse in the earth under
our path near that old river.

Even as a swallow swims through the air
a certain day skips and returns, hungry for
the feel and lift of the time passed by.

That was the place where I lived awhile
dragging a wing, and the spin of the world
started its tilt into where it is now.

They say that history is going on somewhere.
They say it won't stop. I have held
one picture still for a long time and waited.

This is only a little report floated

into the slow current so the wind will know
which way to come if it wants to find me.

David Bjorlin says

Along with Denise Levertov, W.H. Auden, Mary Oliver, Jane Kenyon, and Naomi Shihab Nye (one of Stafford's students), this collection of Stafford rocketed him into my poetic hall of fame. Too many good ones to quote.

Monty says

'You there, reading this, be ready,' was read on my wedding day and I was ready...

I go back to stafford often. Someone says in the introduction to 'The Way it is' that there is a different stafford for everyone.

I love all the staffords - the playful, the funny, the important, the popular, the moral, the angry, the meditative, the sad..
