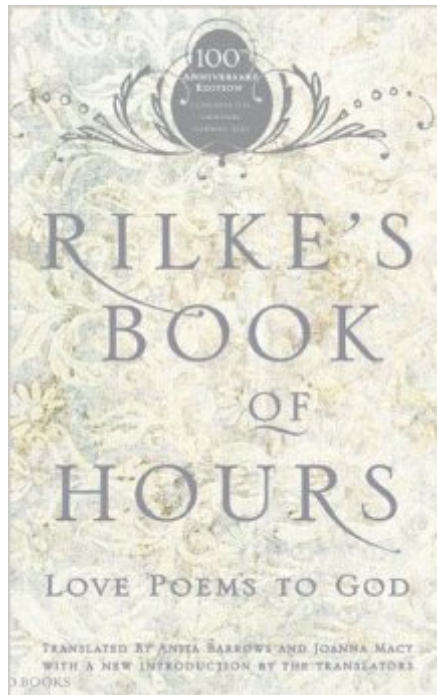


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Rilke's Book Of Hours: Love Poems To God



Synopsis

A FINALIST FOR THE PEN/WEST TRANSLATION AWARDThe 100th Anniversary Edition of a global classic, containing beautiful translations along with the original German text. While visiting Russia in his twenties, Rainer Maria Rilke, one of the twentieth century's greatest poets, was moved by a spirituality he encountered there. Inspired, Rilke returned to Germany and put down on paper what he felt were spontaneously received prayers. Rilke's Book of Hours is the invigorating vision of spiritual practice for the secular world, and a work that seems remarkably prescient today, one hundred years after it was written. Rilke's Book of Hours shares with the reader a new kind of intimacy with God, or the divine—a reciprocal relationship between the divine and the ordinary in which God needs us as much as we need God. Rilke influenced generations of writers with his Letters to a Young Poet, and now Rilke's Book of Hours tells us that our role in the world is to love it and thereby love God into being. These fresh translations rendered by Joanna Macy, a mystic and spiritual teacher, and Anita Barrows, a skilled poet, capture Rilke's spirit as no one has done before.

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Customer Reviews

A Shameful TranslationThis volume is quite possibly the sloppiest, most disrespectful, and least reliable "translation" of Rilke I have ever seen. The term "translation" can only be used in the most casual sense for in their notes on translation Barrows and Macy describe a kind of vague new-age method of translation consisting of a kind of collaboration between them and the original, full of interpretation and subjectivity (pg. 35). At one point they even confess to doing away entirely with

the accurate translation of one of the poems in favour of a "metaphorical" translation (pg. 40). They admit to omitting lines, entire sections of poems, and even collapsing two consecutive poems into one (pg. 41). Any legitimate and reputable translator would be horrified by these hackneyed techniques. For example, in the very first poem, one which sets the tone for the whole book, Barrows and Macy, in their foot notes, admit to cutting out the entire last stanza, fully one-third of the first poem because, "it is not as strong as the first two stanzas, especially for the opening poem of *The Book of Hours*." Rilke, his editor, and his publisher obviously thought it was strong enough. The fact of the matter is that Rilke's work is what it is and it is not the translator's place, as any reputable translator knows full well, to make those determinations. On page 42 of their notes on translation, commenting further on Rilke's supposedly weak writing, they smugly comment, "Since we could not bring him the chicken soup he needed on those long nights [of writing], we have done him the favour of culling." One wishes they had done him the favour of a reliable and reputable translation instead of rewriting his beautiful and thoughtful original.

As well intentioned as this volume may be, there is simply never an excuse for severely editing a poet's work in order to "fit modern sensibilities." I'm not talking about the process of translating itself, which inevitably alters a text, but rather Anita Barrows and Joanna Macy's admitted practice of omitting many poems in Rilke's *Book of Hours*, and even entire stanzas of other poems that they simply didn't like. But let them speak for themselves. This is from the book's notes on translation: "Our many omissions were made out of respect for Rilke (!) to convey and preserve **WHAT WE CONSIDERED** his essential meaning, undistracted by cliches and undiluted by mixed metaphors...what seemed appropriate to Rilke in Europe nearly a hundred years ago sometimes smacks of pious sentimentality to the American reader on the edge of the 21st century." How fortunate for Rilke that he managed to sustain a reputation for greatness all these years without the help of these two revisionist editors to clean up his act! If you like your Rilke strained through the sieve of Berkely political correctness circa 1991 then this is the volume for you. If, however, you believe that much of Rilke's greatness lies in the fact that what he wrote nearly a century ago continues to speak to the universal human condition today, choose another translation. I returned this one.

Rainer Maria Rilke's poetry sings and dances...in its original. This book is again proof that is well-nigh impossible to translate poetry and to preserve its fundamental nature. What places the finishing touches upon Rilke in his native German is his beautiful sense of linguistic balance, of

metric symmetry. This translation was executed, though, with no regard to metre (the translators admit as much). While they tend to successfully encapsulate Rilke's meaning, it is rather a free-form exercise...often omitting two or three lines at a whim...would perhaps be better to view this as Anita Barrows' personal interpretation of Rilke's poetry. Poetry is extremely challenging to translate (Rilke notoriously so); this is a game effort, and an interesting approach...but it isn't really Rilke at the end of it all. All that said, I refrain from dunning this entirely...the kernel of Rilke's meaning pokes through, but I firmly recommend reading this instead in German, ability provided. As far as suitable English translations of Rilke, the best ones available to my mind are those done by Edward Snow.

I hadn't read Rilke in years. And then, wonderfully, I pulled this hitherto unopened translation off my shelves, and rediscovered what so moved me in his poetry when I was a young man. Rilke has the true poet's gift of seeing more deeply into the fabric of existence than most of us, and the ability to invite us to look a bit more closely. He hints, insinuates, teases, and almost always illuminates. I particularly love this book because Rilke, in keeping with the tradition of love mysticism, wants to suggest that there's no fundamental difference between the intense yearning for another person and the intense yearning for God. As the poet/narrator tells a young monk struggling with passions of the flesh, "now, like a whispering in dark streets/rumors of God run through your dark blood." Love of God and love of humans are both erotic inasmuch as they involve the entire person, mind, soul, and body. To long for the beloved is necessarily a sensual experience. Moreover, reminiscent of the great medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, Rilke holds that God erotically yearns for us as much as we yearn for God. One of my favorite poems in the book, "Was wirst du tun, Gott, wenn ich sterbe?", hauntingly worries about the devastating effect the poet/narrator's death will have upon God the Lover: What will you do, God, when I die? I am your pitcher (when I shatter?) I am your drink (when I go bitter?) I, your garment; I, your craft. Without me what reason have you?...What will you do, God? I am afraid.

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