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By Sun and Candlelight

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~~Editor's Choice:~~

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

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The generous format is an invitation in itself, while the dust-wrapper, with title and image picked out in gold, promises 'Poetry and Prose for all Your Days'. There is lavish white space on the attractively designed pages. The anthology leads its reader from infancy and adolescence through to old age and death; from Lear and Carroll to Blake and 'Eternity in an hour'. Shirley Hughes's nostalgic black and white images enhance almost every page.

But who is it for? Hughes envisages an audience of 'both older children and adults', hoping that 'many of us will be sent happily back to re-read and re-discover forgotten pleasures'. The publisher talks of a 'stunning gift collection'; well yes, but perhaps best given *to* grandparents, not *by* them. Of the 60 entries, 32 are extracts, some of them very brief. Many of the poems ('The Lady of Shalott' or 'The Forsaken Merman', for example) are narratives, so you can hear the music in the extracted lines but need a memory to make sense of a story. The selection by the anonymous compiler is conservative: lines from Homer, Shakespeare and the Authorised Version; and several poems older readers might have met, and maybe learned, in distant classrooms - 'Ozymandias', 'The Highwayman' or the 1970s school anthology favourite, Causley's 'Timothy Winters'. Living poets are sparsely represented by Roger McGough, Wendy Cope and John Agard. All the prose writers are long gone - Hardy is the most recent; we're offered the likes of two or three lines of Gradgrind's 'Teach these boys and girls nothing but facts' or Mr Bennet's 'Your mother will never see you again if you do not marry Mr Collins and I will never see you again if you do.'

These familiar echoes will provide mature readers with the pleasures Shirley Hughes hopes for; but it is difficult to see how such extracts will make for coherent or enticing first encounters for the 'older children' she mentions. At £12.99 for a book which is a physical pleasure, though, you could say it's worth it for the illustrations. There are those rounded Hughes figures who can seem cosy in one image, poignant, romantic or haunting in others. A few illustrations spread across the double page. The reapers by the river's edge look up and 'hear a song that echoes cheerly/ From the river winding clearly/ Down to tower'd Camelot?'; while Tommy Atkins, slumped and chill in his trench, has 'come to the borders of sleep' in Edward Thomas's 'Lights Out'. Those older readers may well have known Shirley Hughes for much of their lives. The first of the 200 or more books she has illustrated was published in 1960.

Links:

[1] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/childrens-books/by-sun-and-candlelight>

[2] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/186>

[3] <http://typo3.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/geoff-fox>