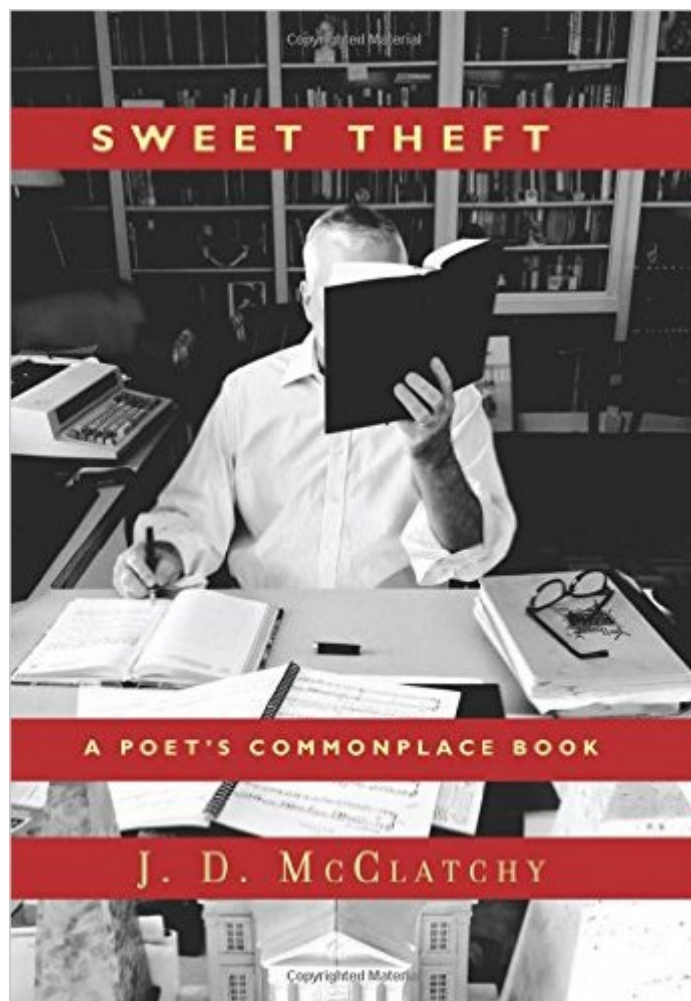


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Sweet Theft: A Poet's Commonplace Book



Synopsis

Centuries ago, when books were rare, those who owned them would lend them to friends, who in turn would copy out passages they especially liked before returning the precious book to its owner. These anthologies came to be known as Commonplace Books, and modern writers as different as W. H. Auden and Alec Guinness have kept them as well, recording phrases or passages that struck them as wise or witty or quirky. The result is as much the self-portrait of a sensibility as it is a collection of miscellaneous delights. Renowned poet J. D. McClatchy has been keeping such a book for three decades now. This selection from it offers a unique look into what strange facts, what turns of mind or phrase, what glorious feats of language and nature can attract the attention of a poet. The great and the obscure are gathered around the same table, exchanging remarkable opinions. Henry James is speaking of Venice: "The deposed, the defeated, the disenchanted, the wounded, or even only the bored, have seemed to find there something that no other place could give." At the other end of the table, Groucho Marx is playing drama critic: "I didn't like the play, but then I saw it under adverse circumstances; the curtain was up." Nietzsche and Flaubert, Dizzy Gillespie and Marianne Moore; dozens of unexpected and timeless aphorisms and anecdotes that pierce and provoke. Many of McClatchy's own observations about the art and prowess of writing are included as well. This is a book meant to be sipped, not gulped; meant to be read at leisure and pondered on at length.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

J. D. McClatchy is the editor of "The Yale Review" and author of six books of poetry as well as about ten opera libretti. He writes that the one book he has scribbled in for forty years is his

commonplace book, "a sort of ledger of envies and joys". In SWEET THEFT, he gathers and passes on about half of that material. McClatchy's is about the tenth commonplace book in which I have spent at least ten minutes grazing. I have not yet encountered one that was truly satisfying. That probably is because much of what the "curator" chooses to place in such a book is so personal. The audience, ultimately, is he alone, as opposed to the public at large. SWEET THEFT proved to be more congenial than most, as evidenced by the fact that it is the first one that I read cover to cover. In part that is due to the fact that many of the entries are quite short -- witty quips and brief anecdotes, as opposed to extended expository or lyrical passages (although the book does include a few of those, some of which, depending on my mood, I skipped). McClatchy forewarns the reader that the book "is meant to be sipped, not gulped", and true enough I found myself proceeding at a pace of ten to fifteen pages at a time. Not surprisingly, more entries pertain to poets and poetry than to any other subject. The second most common subject is opera and music. Third, literature in general. But it's not all high brow (Little Richard even makes an appearance). There is a generous dose of humor (including a few limericks). A handful of entries reflect the fact that McClatchy is gay. On the minus side of the ledger, too many of the entries I either do not understand or I cannot conceive why anyone ever found them worth writing down in the first place.

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