

The Ghost Soldiers

James Tate

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Pulitzer Prize-winning poet James Tate returns with his fifteenth book of poetry, an exciting new collection that offers nearly one hundred fresh and thought-provoking pieces that embody Tate's trademark style and voice: his accessibility, his dark humor, and his exquisite sense of the absurd.

Tate's work is stark—he writes in clear, everyday language—yet his seemingly simple and macabre stories are layered with broad and trenchant meaning. His characters are often lost or confused, his settings bizarre, his scenarios brilliantly surreal. Opaque, inscrutable people float through a dreamlike world where nothing is as it seems. *The Ghost Soldiers* offers resounding proof, once again, that Tate stands alone in American poetry.

The Ghost Soldiers Details

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Peggy says

One hundred surrealist prose poems. They read like dreams. The names of the characters are unimportant. One person blends into another. The landscape changes. The narrative unfolds through dialog. The common factor among them all is a sense of powerlessness. Something, somebody is controlling the drama. Whether it be the war-machine, a secretive corporate agency, God, a dreamer--we are all stuck in a time and place, unable to determine what to do, where to find safety, who to trust. Brilliant but numbing.

Krzysztof says

I closed the book, put my jacket on, and headed downtown. Waiting for the cross signal, an old man looked at me. "You look like you've just been through a war," he said. I looked at my reflection in the tinted windows of a passing Cadillac. I looked the straight-faced man of thirty that I was, but every hair was in place. "I've just finished reading *The Ghost Soldiers*," I said. "Even for prose poems, they weren't very poetic. More like Italo Calvino's fables. Flash fables." "Perhaps they weren't poetic, but were they prophetic?" he said. "Listen, I can't worry about that now. I'm supposed to give a lecture on anti-war novels to the punks down at CBGB's," I said. "I've got a couple of sick grand-children to get home. I'm waiting for them to be dismissed from school now," he said. I thought of all the strange old folks of Hyrule and Ultima. How all of their non-sequiturs come back eventually.

"Here comes one of them now," he said. I saw a small boy trotting toward us in the same direction as the car with the tinted-windows, which was coming back our way. The boy crossed the street and the car turned the corner and hit him. The driver got out of the car. He wore aviators and had a wire in his ear. He knelt down to the boy and felt for a pulse. He was dead. The driver pointed at me. "His wild hair drove me to distraction!" he said. People began to stare. I smoothed my hair down self-consciously. I swallowed hard and looked at the old man. He said, "listen, young man. When you've lived as long as I have, you learn that hair's got nothing to do with it."

Debs says

I've always been a big fan of prose poetry, and I wanted to like these poems more than I did. I hesitate to even call them poems as they're more like a series of vaguely related short stories. "Poems about nothing" is quite an apt description.

Dan says

Some of the better poetry I've read in the past year. It's so unusual. Sometimes I get spooked by what he writes and have to stop and walk around a bit. It's not that he writes about something scary or morbid, but

you get this feeling of something immense hovering around you, in your presence. It's as if he's conjuring a ghost through the writing.

Joe Hunt says

Think this is a better anti-war poem book than "Poets against the War." In its own way.

(Not that the details are there--but the abstract emotions, very realistic.)

Luis Guillermo says

Captivating exercises of creative writing in the form of short stories. Not a single poem was found in this book.

Nan says

Poems, it says on the front of the dust jacket. I'm not so sure. Maybe fables? Modern fairy tales? Where's the music? Where's the compression of thought? There are not enough diamonds in this rough. I think the old emperor might be missing a piece or two of clothing.

Andy says

Didn't mind the absurdism of the poems. It's just the writing that I hated. The poems were really more prose, like dream fables with SOOO MUCH dialogue that bogs down the feeling/emotion of the poems. Not really how I like reading poetry/prose free verse/whatever. Struggled to finish this one.

Corin says

2.5 to 3. Some poems really do leave a strange lasting effect on the reader. That said, half of it feels like it's just trying to get at something and simply fails. I appreciate Tate's imagination and preoccupation for unexplained occurrences, yet many of these "prose poems" lack lyricism and read much like conversational essays/straight narratives. I appreciate surreal poetry, but most of it is disconnected from any sense of urgency and tends to drag. Not to undermine the power of common speech mimicked in poetry, but I believe there has to be a balance between rambling speech and compelling, poetic language. At his best, Tate manages to bring readers somewhere unexpected.

jonathan says

Finally.

I must say, I'm being a little generous with two stars. Several (or perhaps, even all) of these poems are extraordinary, but 50 pages would have been probably been enough to digest. It was more than 200 pages. It's like watching an evening of 5- to 10-minute long abstract David Lynch shorts - for four hours. By the time I was in the last 25 pages, I was just reading to finish. Again, it's a shame, because several of the poems I read were, as I mentioned above, really quite extraordinary.

(Erin, this was my 'The Corrections'.)

Christina M Rau says

I opened *The Ghost Soldiers* without expecting anything more than words on pages. That attitude allowed me to fall down the rabbit hole with the first few syllables. The poems are vignettes, still, mostly prose-like poems, kind of like a book of short stories in which none of the stories are developed the way stories need to be developed, which leaves them as prose poems. Each piece is about people we never know. Reading this book is kind of like driving through the neighborhood when the sky grows dark and looking into people's windows to see what their world is like, knowing full-well you have no idea what their world is like by looking through their front window.

I got really into the collection, writing down the names of the poems I really liked, and then I realized I really liked a lot of them. Then I came to the second half and everything kind of melded into one blurry world and I couldn't find the beginnings and endings. At which point, I became slightly tired of the magical Tate world. In fact, I began to diagnose him as schizophrenic. Perhaps that's the point of the book.

James says

I think I'll call this Tate's magnum opus. Each poem is a different character wandering in the broken sensibilities of his or her own making. Like dreams, in this book the speakers walk out of their front doors to find themselves in alien landscapes they insist are familiar. Exploring this insistence is Tate's gift. Simic calls this anti-poetry (he means it, I believe, in a nice way). There are over ninety poems here, each a different personae, a different name, a newly fabricated situation in orderly chaos. A representative poem might be "The Deep Zone." A little taste: "[...]A man in a green suit tried / to sell me a car made out of possum skulls. I was covered with / leeches, but I didn't mind. [...] I fell through a hole in the water / and landed in the back of a Chinese laundry, where I've been / working ever since."

Bill says

This was my first experience with James Tate, and wow, I am impressed! I don't remember how this book fell into my lap. Most likely, I fell in love with the cover. I was unfamiliar with Tate's poetry before this

book, so I wasn't really expecting such narrative fables. But wow! Again, I really enjoyed these war poems, some of which left a lasting impression on me. Looking forward to reading more of his work!

John says

New books by James Tate are always worth attention. This one, though, seems special. He's found a resonant center for his flights of narrative: War. Meanderings within a framework of war seem especially resonant for Tate. In much the way that personal tragedy took Mary Jo Bang's attention into a sphere that many consider to be her strongest work, *Elegy* (though I think I'll always be partial to *Louise in Love*, myself), so too does national tragedy seem to have dragged Tate up into a cultural connectivity that will, I believe, connect with a lot of people. I fully expect this book to be on the award lists for next year. It's large. And, well, large: 217 pages.

See if you agree:

The War Next Door

I thought I saw some victims of the last war bandaged and limping through the forest beside my house. I thought I recognized some of them, but I wasn't sure. It was kind of a hazy dream from which I tried to wake myself, but they were still there, bloody, some of them on crutches, some lacking limbs. This sad parade went on for hours. I couldn't leave the window. Finally, I opened the door. "Where are you going?" I shouted. "We're just trying to escape," one of them shouted back. "But the war's over," I said. "No it's not," one said. All the news reports had said it had been over for days. I didn't know who to trust. It's best to just ignore them, I told myself. They'll go away. So I went into the living room and picked up a magazine. There was a picture of a dead man. He had just passed my house. And another dead man I recognized. I ran back in the kitchen and looked out. A group of them were headed my way. I opened the door. "Why didn't you fight with us?" they said. "I didn't know who the enemy was, honest, I didn't," I said. "That's a fine answer. I never did figure it out myself," one of them said. The others looked at him as if he were crazy. "The other side was the enemy, obviously, the ones with the beady eyes," said another. "They were mean," another said, "terrible." "One was very kind to me, cradled me in his arms," said one. "Well, you're all dead now. A lot of good that will do you," I said. "We're just gaining our strength back," one of them said. I shut the door and went back in the living room. I heard scratches at the window at first, but then they faded off. I heard a bugle in the distance, then the roar of a cannon. I still don't know which side I was on.

Annabelle says

this is crazy good
