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Les Fleurs Du Mal



Synopsis

This translation of Baudelaire's magnum opus perhaps the most powerful and influential book of verse from the 19th century - won the American Book Award for Translation. And the honor was well-deserved, for this is one of Richard Howard's greatest efforts. It's all here: a timeless translation, the complete French text, and Mazur's striking black and white monotypes in one elegant edition.

Book Information

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: David R. Godine; First edition, second printing edition (October 1, 1985)

Language: English, French

ISBN-10: 0879234628

ISBN-13: 978-0879234621

Product Dimensions: 9 x 5.3 x 1 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (68 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

Let me declare immediately that I agree with the other reader-reviews here: Richard Howard's translations of these poems are rich, sensual, potent, lurid renderings. His verse forgoes the shoehorn of obeying the foreign rhymes (a decision shared by Dante's best translators) and pursues instead a laden, incantatory English that is utterly full and alive--really alive and vital, almost writhing in his versions of Baudelaire's most charnel poems (like "Carrion," "Against Her Levity," and the grim crescendo of "To the Reader"), and with a nearly pungent eros in the courtless mistress poems. One need only read the French originals (included in the book's second half) to appreciate the alchemy of Howard's admixture of fidelity and music. They don't sound self-conscious like most translations, and I find myself reading them aloud. But as for the whole volume--well, despite Howard's introductory apologia and his Keats quip, we could use explanatory notes, even if they're just stashed inobtrusively in the back, as with the Oxford Press edition. Howard calls such notes an "overbearing gloss," but we could always ignore them, if we wanted, so I don't see what the danger

is. I find context valuable--after all, Baudelaire wrote within one. Howard's Baudelaire both stirs and harrows me, but it also awakens an earnest and respectful curiosity, the kind that must bring any translator to their authors in the first place, and ironically my proper curiosity makes this unannotated book incomplete. I appreciate Howard's stout chronology of Baudelaire's life and work, but we could use an account of Baudelaire's aims, of symbolist poetry, of his sources and his impact.

As both poet and critic, Baudelaire stands in relation to French and European poetry as Gustave Flaubert and Edouard Manet do to fiction and painting; as a crucial link between Romanticism and modernism and as a supreme example, in both his life and work, of what it means to be a modern artist. His catalytic influence was recognized in the nineteenth century by Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Swinburne and, in the twentieth century by Valéry, Rilke and T.S.

Eliot. Baudelaire's poetic masterpiece, the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* (*Flowers of Evil*) consists of 126 poems arranged in six sections of varying length. Baudelaire always insisted that the collection was not a "simple album" but had "a beginning and an end," each poem revealing its full meaning only when read in relation to the others within the "singular framework" in which it is placed. A prefatory poem makes it clear that Baudelaire's concern is with the general human predicament of which his own is representative. The collection may best be read in the light of the concluding poem, *Le Voyage*, as a journey through self and society in search of some impossible satisfaction that forever eludes the traveler. The first section, entitled *Spleen et idéal*, opens with a series of poems that dramatize contrasting views of art, beauty and the artist, who is depicted alternately as martyr, visionary, performer, pariah and fool. The focus then shifts to sexual and romantic love, with the first-person narrator of the poems oscillating between extremes of ecstasy (*idéal*) and anguish (*spleen*) as he attempts to find fulfillment through a succession of women whom it is possible, if simplistic, to identify with Jeanne Duval, Apollonie Sabatier and Marie Daubrun.

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