

Pockell, Leslie — Editor
THE 100 BEST POEMS OF ALL TIME
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Leslie Pockell, an associate publisher at Warner Books, has compiled the current collection of poetic favorites “to provide a small, easily portable volume that would contain the essential works that most readers would expect to find in a book of the best poems.” While this elliptical pronouncement seems to suggest a readers’ poll determined what was included, the editor makes no secret of his selection criteria. While one may disagree with both some of the inclusions and the exclusions, it has considerable breadth for such a slim volume. An index of first lines insures its use as a handy reference. A good deal of space is reserved for the classics, beginning with Homer and Sappho, and including the 23rd Psalm and Shakespeare’s 18th Sonnet, works misquoted nearly as often as they’re quoted. Necessarily, few works of any length are presented in their entirety. A large proportion of the poems tend to be lyrical, owing to the editor’s predilection for poetry that, according to W. H. Auden’s definition of verse, qualifies as “memorable speech.” Perhaps he has gone a little too far in this direction by offering Friedrich von Schiller’s “Ode to Joy,” a work ennobled by Beethoven’s choral setting, but one that is clunky when used without adornment. Notwithstanding, the editor strives to earn the volume wide appeal, presenting poetry of interest to younger readers as well, such as Clement Clarke Moore’s famous Christmas poem and Edward Lear’s “The Owl and the Pussycat,” among others. Glaringly absent from this anthology, in case anyone cares, are the nonsensical ramblings of the darlings of academe who would prefer poetry remain on its pedestal, out of the rabble’s reach.

Stephen Spender said that great poetry is always written by somebody straining to go beyond what he can do. Occasionally, an editor attempts to do the same.