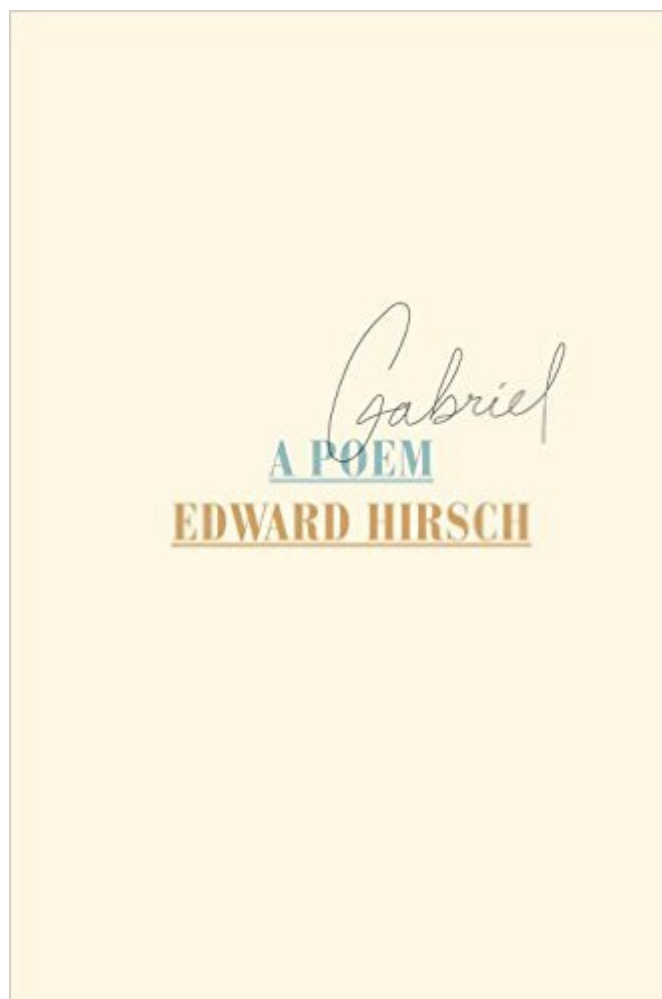


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Gabriel: A Poem



Synopsis

Longlisted for the 2014 National Book Award Never has there been a book of poems quite like *Gabriel*, in which a short life, a bewildering death, and the unanswerable sorrow of a father come together in such a sustained elegy. This unabashed sequence speaks directly from Hirsch's heart to our own, without sentimentality. From its opening lines "The funeral director opened the coffin / And there he was alone / From the waist up" Hirsch's account is poignantly direct and open to the strange vicissitudes and tricks of grief. In propulsive three-line stanzas, he tells the story of how a once unstoppable child, who suffered from various developmental disorders, turned into an irreverent young adult, funny, rebellious, impulsive. Hirsch mixes his tale of *Gabriel* with the stories of other poets through the centuries who have also lost children, and expresses his feelings through theirs. His landmark poem enters the broad stream of human grief and raises in us the strange hope, even consolation, that we find in the writer's act of witnessing and transformation. It will be read and reread. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This poem reminded me of something. I pulled Emily Dickinson, John Ciardi's *Dante*, and Felix Feneon's *Novels in Three Lines* off the shelf. Dickinson was too nineteenth century, but plenty of truth there. Ciardi had the three-line stanza, but he was doing *Dante* and had to haul out every word he knew. Feneon was closest. As a journalist, he had to call death by its right name. In his new book-length poem *Gabriel*, Edward Hirsch has given his dead son a proper send off and he has

begun the task of placing the boy's life in some sort of perspective. It takes a special lens. Gabriel was an adopted child born with a mysterious developmental disorder that made him impetuous, impatient, and loud. No school could hold him. He never had the natural fear of danger that keeps most of us alive. He was never, his father tells us, scared enough of drug dealers, one of whom sold him the tab of GBH that carried him off. I'm pretty sure Mr. Hirsch would never use even that level of metaphor for his son's death. The poem has no sentimentality, no anodyne phrases, no metaphors or euphemisms for death. The death of Gabriel was ugly, sudden, frightening, and final. When I read the poem, I felt lucky to glimpse this remarkable child's life. Fierce energy, sleepless always, loud opinions about everything and everyone, he was loved and his father writes, with an even, steady hand, of his life and his death. What I value most in this poem, after learning about what happened to Gabriel, is the use of language. It is restrained conversation, quiet, precise and respectful. And it's all here. Hirsch places Gabriel as a baby in the context of his childless marriage, the joy of the baby's arrival and the slow realization that Gabriel would be a challenge in every sense.

It is almost impossible to adequately describe or do justice to Edward Hirsch's heart-wrenching elegy about the short life and death of his son Gabriel. Consisting of three-lined stanzas with no punctuation that extends for 78 pages, it is part biography, part ode, part lament--you name it. Mr. Hirsch does an amazing job of letting the personality and life of his beloved son come through these grief-soaked lines. Hirsch and his wife Janet Landay adopted their son Gabriel when he was an infant and welcomed him into their lives. We got glimpses of his childhood, troubled young adulthood and ultimate early death from an apparent accidental drug overdose: "He was trouble/But he was our trouble." Interspersed among the lines that lets us see who his son was, Mr. Hirsch includes the stories of other poets throughout history who have lost children, surely what is the ultimate horror of every parent, what is completely unnatural: the burial of a child. Much of this poem will break your heart: In the casket I hope it's comfortable He would have scorned the old Jew We hired to sit with him overnight Janet [you have to love this woman] didn't want him to be by himself I'm sure he was annoyed by the prayers I wonder if he believed in God I never asked He was sometimes scared He was never scared enough Of scoundrels and drug dealers After Gabriel disappeared, his parents tried to find him: We called 911 every day The police refused to help us We begged them to help they refused Because he wasn't under sixteen or over sixty-five Mr.

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