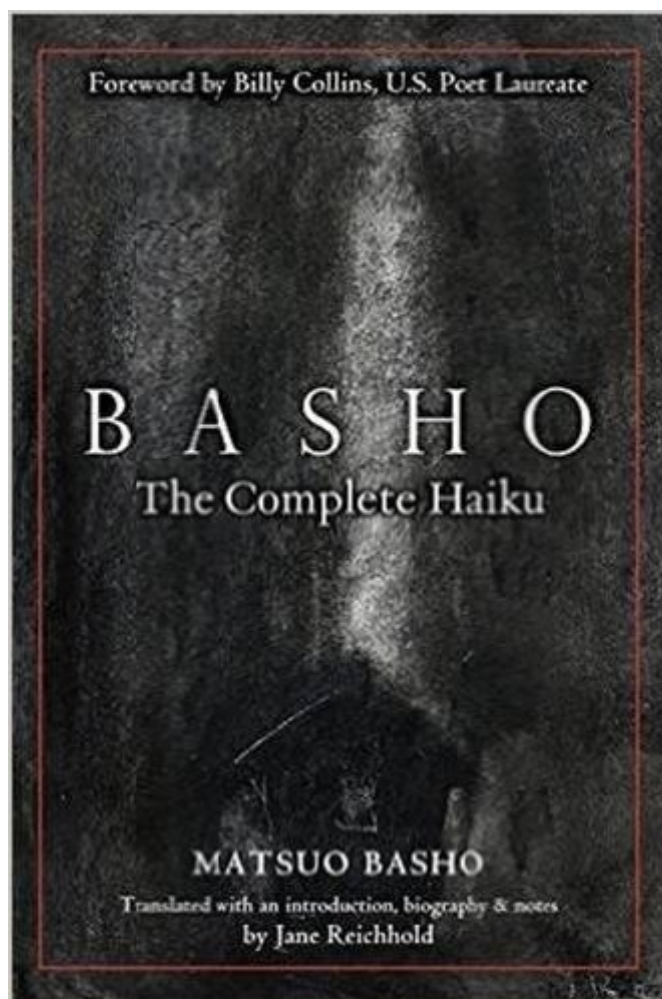


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Basho: The Complete Haiku



Synopsis

Basho stands today as Japan's most renowned writer, and one of the most revered. Wherever Japanese literature, poetry or Zen are studied, his oeuvre carries weight. Every new student of haiku quickly learns that Basho was the greatest of the Old Japanese Masters. Yet despite his stature, Basho's complete haiku have not been collected into a single volume. Until now. To render the writer's full body of work into English, Jane Reichhold, an American haiku poet and translator, dedicated over ten years of work. In *Basho: The Complete Haiku*, she accomplishes the feat with distinction. Dividing his creative output into seven periods of development, Reichhold frames each period with a decisive biographical sketch of the poet's travels, creative influences and personal triumphs and defeats. Scrupulously annotated notes accompany each poem; and a glossary and two indexes fill out the volume. Reichhold notes that, Basho was a genius with words. He obsessively sought out the right word for each phrase of the succinct seventeen-syllable haiku, seeking the very essence of experience and expression. With equal dedication, Reichhold sought the ideal translations. As a result, *Basho: The Complete Haiku* is likely to become the essential work on this brilliant poet and will stand as the most authoritative book on the subject for many years to come. Original sumi-e ink drawings by artist Shiro Tsujimura complement the haiku throughout the book.

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Customer Reviews

Matsuo Basho is the undisputed master of haiku. He refined what was seen as a simple, almost

comic, style of verse into something that we would call high art. A collection like this, with all of his haiku translated and gathered together into a single, annotated volume is an absolute treasure, and the only surprise is that it wasn't published many years ago. Of course, collecting the haiku is easy. There are numerous collections available in Japanese, and it is simply a matter of reprinting them. But translating his haiku is a different problem all together. Haiku are a form of art that take unique advantage of the Japanese language, and they can only be approximated at best. There are two general styles, a more-literal translation that tries to capture the form and order of the writer, and an artistic translation that tries to capture the feel of the poem while using the flow of the English language. The main difference is with the third line, which in a Japanese haiku is always a non-sequitur image that relates only indirectly with the first two lines, providing the scenery for the story. Jane Reichhold takes the artistic approach, and I must admit it is one I am not particularly fond of. This is definitely "Jane Reichhold's Basho: The Complete Haiku", with the emphasis being on her interpretation rather than on introducing people to Basho's poetry. She is undoubtedly talented and respected, having published such books as "Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-on Guide" and "Narrow Road to Renga: A Collection of Renga", and her translations have a beauty and power all of their own, but she ignores Basho's forms, and creates continuous narratives in the poems, narratives that do not exist in the original. Ultimately, it is a matter of style, and preference of one over the other. I prefer a more literal translation that is true to the Japanese original. Others prefer the artistic approach. Some of the best haiku collections, such as "The Classic Tradition of Haiku: An Anthology" (Dover Thrift Editions), present the same poem translated by several different people so you can see how the meaning can change depending on the interpretation. To me, the greatest section of "Basho: The Complete Haiku", which I wish had been the focus of the book rather than tucked into the back, is the appendix with all of Basho's haiku in both their original kanji and in the Alphabet-characters romaji, along with a literal English translation and annotations. This is the true treasure trove, with the master's art in his own words. To make this book perfect, and to take the emphasis off of Reichhold and put it back on Basho, the appendix wouldn't have been tucked into the back but threaded throughout the front with each poem being presented in its original Japanese and accompanied by the annotations and both literal and artistic translations. As it is, I find myself reading the back of the book much more than the front, but even so it is an amazing addition to my library and I am happy to have all the poems collected at last.

The poet Basho (born Matsuo Kinsaku in Iga Province, Japan, in 1644) is widely regarded as the founding father of haiku as we have come to know it. It was Basho who brought to the haikai, as

much pastime as poetry, of the Japanese merchant class and samurai the high seriousness of true art. High seriousness, we must remember, is not solemnity; lightness is one of the defining qualities of Basho's best poems and a key point of his aesthetic. Now, in "Basho: The Complete Haiku," we have for the first time a translation into English of all 1012 of Basho's haiku. Jane Reichhold, an accomplished haiku poet and the author of the highly influential "Writing and Enjoying Haiku: A Hands-On Guide," has been a Basho enthusiast since she first encountered his work, an encounter that set her on her own haiku path. If her translation is a labor of love, it is also a work of dedicated scholarship and poetic sensibility. In Reichhold, the most famous Japanese poet of all time has found his translator for our time. In addition to the poetic translations themselves, the book includes, under the heading of "Notes," the original Japanese poems, Romanized versions, literal word-for-word translations, and commentaries that are unfailingly informative and frequently illuminating. In the back matter, Reichhold provides a chronology of the poet's life, a bibliography of Basho in English, and an index of first lines. All of these are useful, but among the book's most valuable features are a glossary of literary terms (which may also serve for some as an introduction to the spirit of haiku) and an enumeration with examples of 33 haiku techniques employed by the master. This last lends insight into Basho's work and guidance to those who, inspired as Reichhold was by that work, may want to set out on their own haiku path. Ultimately, of course, it's the translations that count, and here Reichhold shows the sure hand of a contemporary poet who is deeply in tune the spirit of the originals. Just a sampling: old pond a frog jumps into the sound of water / autumn deepens so what does he do / the man next door / morning dew / the muddy melon stained with coolness. For anyone seriously interested in haiku, as reader or writer or both, "Basho: The Complete Haiku" will be required reading and rereading.

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