

The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry (5 volumes)

reviewed by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [August 22, 2006](#) issue

In Review



The Greenwood Encyclopedia of American Poets and Poetry (5 volumes)

Jeffrey Gray, James McCorkle and Mary McAleer Balkun, eds.

Greenwood

This encyclopedia provides a surprisingly complete collection of entries on American poetry and poets from the early colonial to the contemporary era. Included are both major and lesser-known poets and several writers whose work has appeared in the *Christian Century*. A particular surprise is the extent to which spiritual and religious concerns are explored by some of the 300 authors of these more than 1,000 entries.

For example, the author of an entry on the "Bible and American Poetry" covers the clear biblical influences in Puritan and 19th-century poetry, notes the shrinking influence of the Bible during the modernist period and comments on the lack of a "Christian agenda" in the poetry of the Harlem Renaissance. He concludes that the Bible has faded in importance in contemporary poetry because it is no longer important in American culture: "This sacred referential text," he writes, "has dimmed into virtual obscurity." This author picks up the same theme in his entry on "Religion and Poetry," where he notes the "strange and greatly diminished place religion now holds in the works of America's greatest poets."

But other entries belie that point. Authors note Richard Wilbur's Christian interests, Jane Kenyon's journey toward faith, and the centrality of faith in the works of Vassar Miller, Paul Mariani, Linda Gregg, Deborah Greger and many others.

In several instances, however, most notably in the entries on T. S. Eliot, Denise Levertov and Czeslaw Milosz, religious allegiances receive only passing remarks, even when they loom large as themes in the works of these writers. As with any encyclopedia, consistency of vision and interests can be only partially controlled by editors.

But then again, the entry on "Puritan Poetry" provides a nuanced interpretation of the cultural and psychological factors at play. Likewise, the entry on "Devotional Poetry" insists that the first American poets with spiritual interests were Native Americans, who were followed only later by the first Anglo-American Puritan poets. This entry also explores the devotional poetry of Jewish writers.

While the hefty price tag will prohibit most readers from buying this encyclopedia, it deserves a place in public, seminary and college libraries that have an interest in American poetry.