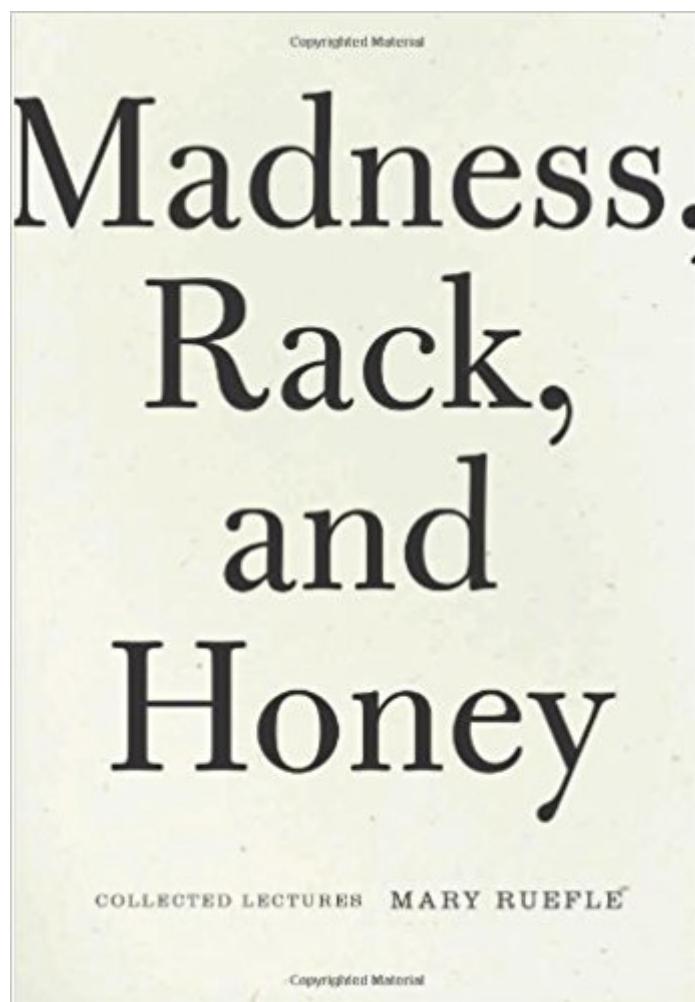


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# Madness, Rack, And Honey: Collected Lectures



## Synopsis

This is one of the wisest books I've read in years... *New York Times Book Review*No writer I know of comes close to even trying to articulate the weird magic of poetry as Ruefle does. She acknowledges and celebrates in the odd mystery and mysticism of the act; the fact that poetry must both guard and reveal, hint at and pull back... Also, and maybe most crucially, Ruefle's work is never once stuffy or overdone: she writes this stuff with a level of seriousness-as-play that's vital and welcome, that doesn't make writing poetry sound anything but wild, strange, life-enlargening fun. -*The Kenyon Review*Profound, unpredictable, charming, and outright funny...These informal talks have far more staying power and verve than most of their kind. Readers may come away dazzled, as well as amused... *Publishers Weekly*This is a book not just for poets but for anyone interested in the human heart, the inner-life, the breath exhaling a completion of an idea that will make you feel changed in some way. This is a desert island book.

Matthew DickmanThe accomplished poet is humorous and self-deprecating in this collection of illuminating essays on poetry, aesthetics and literature... *San Francisco Examiner*Over the course of fifteen years, Mary Ruefle delivered a lecture every six months to a group of poetry graduate students. Collected here for the first time, these lectures include "Poetry and the Moon," "Someone Reading a Book Is a Sign of Order in the World," and "Lectures I Will Never Give." Intellectually virtuosic, instructive, and experiential, *Madness, Rack, and Honey* resists definition, demanding instead an utter; and utterly pleasurable; immersion. Finalist for the 2012 National Book Critics Circle Award.Mary Ruefle has published more than a dozen books of poetry, prose, and erasures. She lives in Vermont.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Madness, Rack and Honey is one of the most important books of contemporary poetic theory I've come across in many years, totally non-academic and written from the point-of-view of a practitioner and innovator of the craft, emphasizing the real over the ideal, the rock-hard detail over the abstract concept. To see Ruefle's mind at work, finding correspondences between seemingly incompatible topics, is a wonder, and her voice rings with clarity and tinkles with offbeat humor. Compare these lithe lectures to Louise Gluck's stodgy prose theorizing, also useful in its way, but not half as much fun and ultimately cold-hearted and academic. The edition by Wave Books is comfortable to read, on sturdy paper and with nice wide margins for making notes.

This book of essays by Ruefle is brilliant---intelligent, deeply humorous, and warmly vulnerable. Every 20 minutes as I am reading Ruefle I shout out to the universe, "I love this woman." I hope new readers will seek her out. She is a gift.

After reading over many years many books and article on the craft of poetry, this is the very first time I have read an examination of poetry that feels truly alive. One good measure of a book on poetry is if having finished it you find your reading of poetry is immediately made the richer. In my case, I picked up the recent issue of Poetry and a book by Ted Hughes, and felt that I had entered a magnified, vibrating world. I am tempted to imagine that I did not, in fact, read Ruefle's book as much as meet her for coffee over several hours. What she calls lectures felt to me like conversation-like essays, some to the notes or journal entries. I suspect there are a few but I can't recall a single instance in which she analyzes a line of poetry; her approach has not a whiff of the academic and is deeply ambitious. She quotes Pound saying that people speak only one sentence in their lives. Her approach, in effect, is to comment, often amusingly, on selective passages of her own sentence, starting at age five, and those of others such as Emily Dickinson and Anne Frank. Her comments include: "I believe that all poetry, poetry from all periods and all cultures, has only one theme, of mutability".... "I do not really see, at this point in my life, any difference between repression and expression."

Mary Ruefle's world is a world of poetry. This book is rich with her reading and experience of Poetry.

She has read and reread a wide variety of poets including those who among the anthologized classics and the contemporary less known. She makes it clear that this absorption in the world of poetry began with her very early. She tells many stories of interest about the life work and thought of a wide variety of poets. She does touch and give examples of her own poetry but the real center of the work is her experiencing of the Poetry of others..There is not I believe an attempt to provide some overall Theory of Poetry but rather an appreciation of many different kinds of Poetry and poets.

Mary Ruefle is poet, essayist, and professor; the recipient of numerous awards and honors. She has received the Whiting Writers' Academy Award, an award in literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as Guggenheim Foundation and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships. She has published eleven books of poetry, most recently *Trances of the Blast* (2013). "Madness, Rack, and Honey" is a collection of Ruefle's lectures to graduate students dating from 1994. The lectures presented in *Madness, Rack, and Honey*, while for the purpose of educating poets, are nothing akin to the more common perception of a lecture. Such discourse is generally associated with the clichéd image that one is being spoken at, tendentiously, tediously, in a flat and bland style. Ruefle, however, is not standing at the lectern here, reading at the students from the same textbook they were assigned at semester's beginning. She is not the jaded and worn speaker who can recite the words backward, forward, sideways, and while playing poker on Friday night. Ruefle's lectures stand out like gold charms on a bracelet "each collected for a specific memory, place, or event, able to stand on its own, yet as a collection, they combine and connect one to another, to form a bracelet as unique and special as the person wearing it. The book presents 14 charms, each its own story, and together as a collection, a precious and unique whole. Reading this book made me want to break out in song. It is melodic and lyrical, a sweet violin andante that pushes forward while you long to be held back in its grasp. There is a waywardness to her lectures. They follow no known map; they actually resist being mapped. Ruefle shares discourse on Emily Dickinson, secrets, endings and beginnings, fear, poetry and the moon. And upon introduction of one of these topics, she then wanders far and wide away from and back to the beginning. There is such a beauty in how she performs this magic. She makes extensive use of the voice of others, often relying on the wisdom of others to attempt an explanation, or certify a digression. What is madness, rack, honey? It is Ruefle's metaphor for what is poetry, a paradox, a non-linear abstraction, the essence of poetry. As she puts it: "As practitioners of poetry you are practitioners of madness, rack, and honey. You are

mercy-givers who execute. You are executioners who show mercy. (p. 141). This definition is exquisite. Read it again. Mercy-givers and executioners, such a bold thought. A contradiction. A magical cloak for the poet to wear; turn right and it is one thing, turn left, the opposite. A paradox which Ruefle attempts to resolve in her collected lectures. One which she speaks contrary to her assertions frequently and with full knowing. She admits she is serving up truth which she then belies. Part of the fascination for the poet in poetry is that it bends back upon itself, snaking away from certainty which presenting a truth for the moment. It is also the nature of poetry to determine or affirm one's relation to the incomprehensible condition of existence (p.132). There are options here, not certainties. *Madness, Rack, and Honey: Collected Lectures*

Mary Ruefle is an intriguing writer. I'm surprised I had not crossed her literary path before learning about this book. She is well-known and much honored as a poet, though "Madness, Rack, and Honey" consists of essays that began as lectures delivered at Vermont College, where she teaches. They are very poetic essays, too, which make me eager to read more of her poetry than the few examples I've found posted online. She has a unique turn of mind (and the perfect poet's name) and seems to live and breathe her work, much as Emily Dickinson (whom she writes of here) once did. What results, whether essay or poem, is full of delight and amazement at everyday life. Her grasp of poetry and its practitioners, present and past, is dazzling as well. She has obviously read widely and deeply, and speaks heartfully of the experience. Her students are lucky indeed to have a teacher who can convey the elusive beauties of poetry in such a clear and subtle fashion. Others can buy a copy of this beautiful book.

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