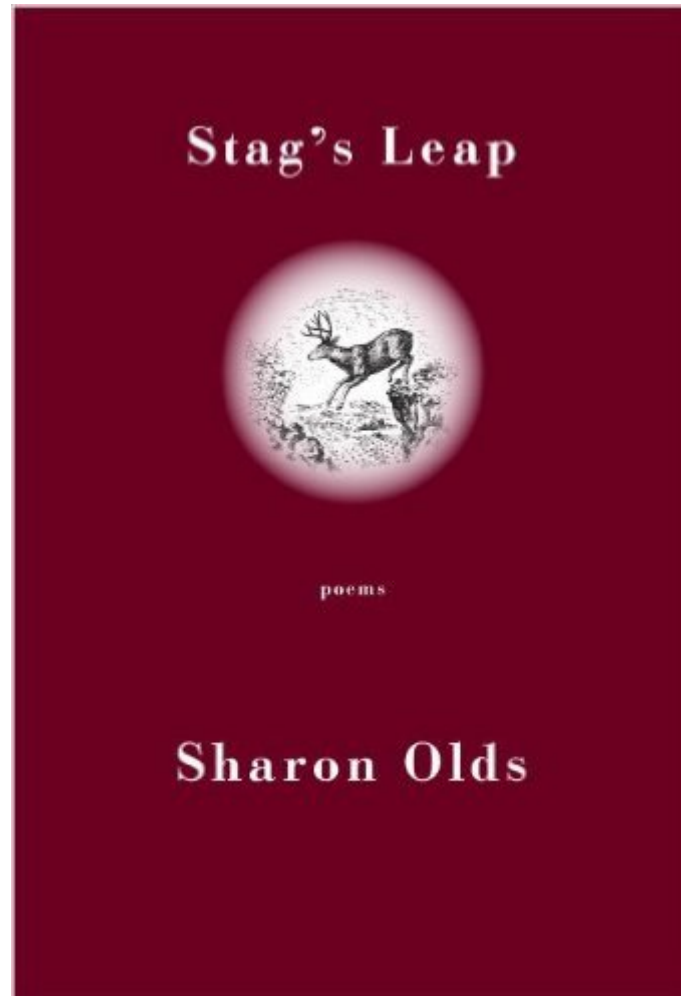


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Stag's Leap: Poems



Synopsis

Stagâ€™s Leap is stunningly poignant sequence of poems that tells the story of a divorce, embracing strands of love, sex, sorrow, memory, and new freedom. In this wise and intimate tellingâ€”which carries us through the seasons when her marriage was endingâ€”Sharon Olds opens her heart to the reader, sharing the feeling of invisibility that comes when we are no longer standing in loveâ€™s sight; the surprising physical bond that still exists between a couple during parting; the loss of everything from her husbandâ€™s smile to the set of his hip. Olds is naked before us, curious and brave and even generous toward the man who was her mate for thirty years and who now loves another woman. As she writes in the remarkable “Stagâ€™s Leap,” “When anyone escapes, my heart / leaps up. / Even when itâ€™s I who am escaped from, / I am half on the side of the leaver.” Oldsâ€™ propulsive poetic line and the magic of her imagery are as lively as ever, and there is a new range to the musicâ€”sometimes headlong, sometimes contemplative and deep. Her unsparing approach to both pain and love makes this one of the finest, most powerful books of poetry Olds has yet given us.

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Customer Reviews

I have been a fan of Sharon Olds since a copy of "Satan Says" leapt from a used bookstore shelf and into my college backpack, and lived there for the better part of a year. As I continued to explore her work through her numerous books, I fell in love with her poetry, how it balances the hard and soft of life. I loved how her sharp, perceptive mind was balanced and embellished by a sensual,

love-drunk heart. Her poems about her husband were some of the most tender and authentic writing about adult committed relationships that I'd ever experienced. Her poetry grew to be an enormous influence on me as both a writer and a woman, and I know that I am not alone in that. When news of Olds's divorce became public, I remember gasping out loud in shock. I had read and reread her poems so much, that I remembered their details of their thirty year long marriage almost as if it was my own. I felt guilty about how I immediately craved to read her poetry about the subject, to see how her mind was processing what seemed so impossible to me. Fifteen years later, "Stag's Leap" tells the story of this harrowing time in Olds's life. From the first poem "While He Told Me" (which explores with heart-breaking detail the evening her husband told he wanted a divorce, while her eyes darted "from small thing / to small thing, in our room, the face / of the bedside clock, the sepia postcard / of a woman bending down to a lily") to the last poem "What Left" (where she stares back at the fifteen years of cleaving, and the years proceeding it, with marvelous strength and clarity), Olds creates a masterwork of love and loss. Delicate, intimate and un-self-conscious, Olds explores the landscape of the new world she is stunned to find herself.

Contemporary American poetry arose a half century ago out of the confluence of a number of social and literary trends. The first was the rise of the confessional school of poets, associated especially with Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and John Berryman: poets who attempted to make poems out of their lives, frankly using their most intimate real life experiences as subject matter. At the same time, poetry rather suddenly went from being something which ordinary people at least occasionally would read - many old enough will remember a time when the typical household had at least a few poetry books around, even if they were old chestnuts like the Oxford Book of English Verse, the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, and The Complete Poems of Keats and Shelley - to something which virtually no one except poets, critics, and a few college students paid any attention to. Both as cause and effect of this disregard, poets quickly moved into the ivory tower, with the great majority of persons claiming the title poet actually making their living as academics. This migration of poets to the academy was simultaneous with the creative writing movement, in which professors believed any student could be taught to be a poet by being inculcated with the movement's trinity of principles - "Find Your Voice," "Show, Don't Tell," and "Write What You Know," and mastering a toolkit of specialized literary devices. One of the most pernicious effects of these developments was the evolution of confessional poetry into poetry as therapy. Those original confessionalists were fine poets, but their successors adopted the same frankness without the same talent, learning, or discipline.

A recent film, "A Late Quartet," is about a chamber music group forced to confront the cellist's illness. The movie is a kind of classical music soap opera, and there's a subplot I could have done without, but most of the writing is crisp and the acting is sensational. I was especially taken by a scene in which Philip Seymour Hoffman apologizes to his wife, Catherine Keener, for a stupid night of infidelity. Hoffman: I love you more than anything in the world. I made a stupid mistake. Keener's response is inconclusive. Hoffman: Do you really love me? Or I am just... convenient? Keener: What do you want? What is it you want me to tell you? That exchange broke me because the language and the emotion merged --- in that desperate moment, you don't have Shakespearean eloquence, just raw hurt. Those emotions are written in blood in the 49 poems in "Stag's Leap," the new book by Sharon Olds. If you've read her, you know that politics and poetics are not her topic. She is. And this time, she has an epic event to write about. When she was 55 and had been married for 32 years, her husband announced that he had fallen in love with another woman and was leaving her. That was devastating for Olds --- she had often written about her marriage, and for those who read her poems as a diary, it was passionate and profound. Now, reflexively, she began to write again. She made one promise, and it was to her two adult children: I won't publish anything for a decade. Fifteen years later, she published "Stag's Leap." The reference is to her husband's favorite wine. Equally, that stag jumping off a cliff was a metaphor for her husband's exit: "When anyone escapes, my heart/ leaps up.

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