

Songs from Fern's Pond: Composing a Life with Courage, Gratitude, and Joy

Sheryl Pothier Harmer

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The skillful poems of Songs from Fern's Pond explore loss, family, and the power of human will.

Sheryl Pothier Harmer's *Songs from Fern's Pond* is a stirring poetic tribute to her mother, who staked out a solitary, hardscrabble existence on the far western frontier.

A self-described "collage," the book collects Harmer's memories of her mother, Fern, in the last decades of her life. Its "snapshot" poems are interspersed with short narratives and excerpts from Fern's letters to family members and neighbors, shared in linear order.

Following the death of her lifelong partner in the 1970s, Fern bought a plot of land near a natural spring in an unforgiving stretch of the south Idaho desert. Under Fern's tutelage, the arid land became a fertile homestead, replete with a dizzying variety of vegetables, farm animals, and homespun crafts. The poems—written from Fern's perspective—capture the thrills of this solitary frontier life. As the years roll on, their joy is shot through with a creeping sense of loneliness. The poetic narrative continues through Fern's failing health and her family's eventual inheritance of the home, culminating in a tragic electrical fire that reduces Fern's long-standing creation back to a state of wildness.

The poems have a novelistic bent, balancing psychological insights with detailed worldbuilding. The opening to "Collections," a poem about Fern's extensive collection of ephemera, is one example:

From scarcity came a compulsion to collect—

*assembling a collage of a life
in all its longed-for fullness
creating an archive of stories
that were never told—*

This emphasis on "untold stories" is one of the collection's reigning motifs. Its poems concentrate on silent, inward moments of Fern's life rather than on her family's public celebrations. With this focus on interiority, the collection reflects the extreme solitude of Fern's life and occasional intrusions of melancholy.

Written in irregular meter, the poems reflect sound rhythmic judgment. Line breaks arrive at natural pauses, with only rare examples of awkward enjambments. Expressive free verse shapes Fern Pond's ecological splendors on the page. Dramatic escarpments, expansive plateaus, and fragrant vineyards are captured in long litanies made up of tight, controlled stanzas:

*So, she goes out among the moonlit rows

where late-August grapes*

*hang heavy on the vine,
their swollen fruits
and tendrils hiding
deep among the shadows.*

Quick bursts of natural descriptions result in powerful moments, though some are overreliant on easy metaphorical connections, as with repeated references to early buds of spring and the idea of “rebirth.” Nonetheless, the poems evoke the careful attentiveness of famed ecologists, with nature made to mingle with human dramas throughout.

Blending elements of memorialization with nature writing, *Songs from Fern’s Pond* is a poetry collection that explores loss, family, and the power of human will.

ISAAC RANDEL (January 24, 2025)

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