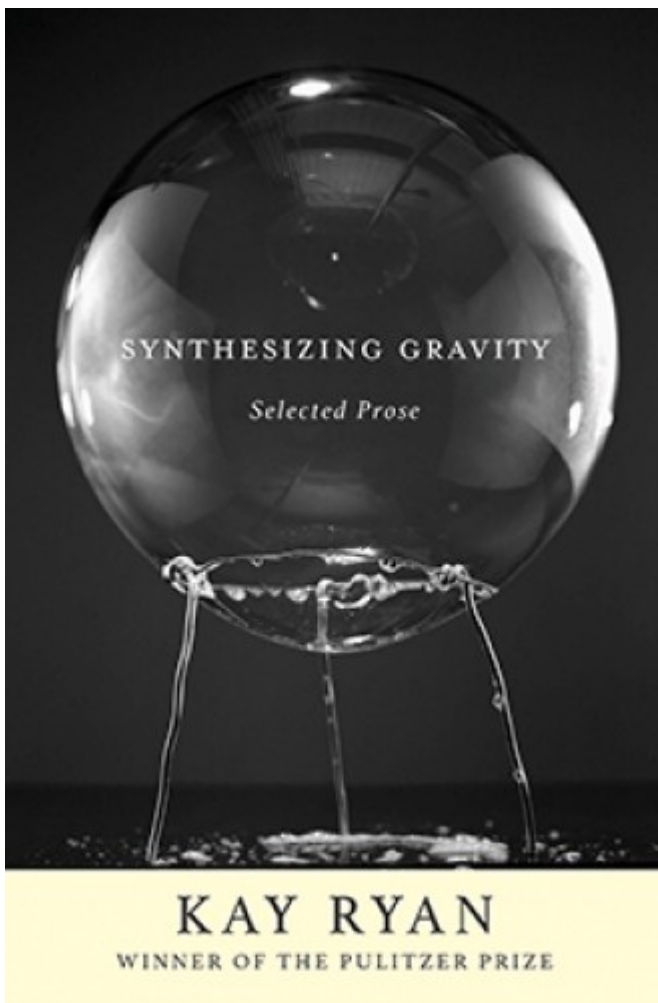


The weird beauty of Kay Ryan's prose

The former poet laureate's quirky faith is a spirituality for prankish oddballs.

by [Olivia Bustion](#) in the [May 20, 2020](#) issue

In Review



Synthesizing Gravity

Selected Prose

By Kay Ryan
Grove Press

Synthesizing Gravity is the first collection of essays by former US poet laureate Kay Ryan. The volume includes several book reviews, a mini-ethnography of the largest American writer's conference, and close readings of poems by Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Philip Larkin, and others.

"Kay Ryan is not religious," reports Christian Wiman in his introduction to the book. To put it this way, though, is to obscure the quirky faith that Ryan's essays recommend.

Like many Anglophone poets since Matthew Arnold, Ryan cannot talk about poetry without making it sound like church. For her, the poems of Stevie Smith tell the truth "in Sunday-school felt-board figures." After reading a poem by William Bronk, Ryan says, "you're shriven; your head is shaved." She describes the sestina—a poetic form she does not herself use—as "penitential" and "spiritual," "ecstatic" and consoling, "mystical" in its stringency. Notebooks and diaries "are the devil's bible," she insists, because trying to remember everything is the opposite of writing a poem, of trying "to make something new."

Ryan even couches her decision to be a poet in religious terms. In the middle of a 4,000-mile bicycle trip "to say yes or no" to "the poetic calling," on a pine-studded pass in the Colorado Rockies, she found "an unprecedented freedom and power to think" through the question of whether to be a poet by repeating Philippians 4:7 to herself. The peace that passeth understanding, she writes, decided "the one question of my whole life."

Typically, the Arnoldian poetry-as-religious-vocation mold is solemn, quivering, a Jell-O salad of nostalgia. Some famous examples are W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. Of Stevens, Ryan writes that "one feels the immensity of his ambition for poetry—to provide a spiritual compass in a drifting world." But Ryan throws the Jell-O salad on the floor. The quirky faith that *Synthesizing Gravity* peddles is a spirituality for prankish oddballs.

The cornerstone of this faith is what Ryan calls *derichment*, a concept that emerges in anecdotes. Ryan claims that her mother's pleasure in tuna and beans, used cars, and saying "the same thing over and over" withstood the tests of "wealth" and "variety." A song by Elvis Presley can make Ryan cry just as readily as "profound

literature” can. She believes that “enforced bed rest . . . allowed Matisse the discovery of his deepest self.”

Votaries of derichment abhor cooperation, Ryan says, and reject “hierarchies of sensibilities.” The rules of the order of derichment are that “higher truths” are side-splittingly funny cartoons, that “the poem that is closest to the size of two grains of wheat will hold the most magic,” that “pleasures become deeper when they are repeated,” that art has to be “wolfish,” and that self-trust is everything. Derichment, in short, is the antonym of luxury, bulk, pomposity, and niceness. Ryan calls it her secret, her life’s goal.

According to Ryan, derichment makes for “a stern faith.” *Stern* is probably an appropriate word to describe a faith that forbids notebooks and diaries, along with photographs and videotapes, on the grounds that recollection and self-examination interfere with surprise. And *stern* is surely an appropriate word for a faith that enjoins bed rest and perseverance on the grounds that boredom is a precondition for discovering one’s deepest self.

But one of derichment’s main teachings, the one that I will bind like a sign upon my hand and between my eyes, is an absolutely relaxing requirement: go on with your weird self; it is perfectly OK to be a freak. The patron saints of derichment are “the solitary, the hermetic, the cranky self-taught.” They are unrepentantly lonely and hungry and “dryish.” They have aggressive souls.

One of the joys of reading *Synthesizing Gravity* is getting to know this pantheon of odd ducks, whom Ryan affectionately calls “my poets.” These saints include the “childlike” Stevie Smith, who “would decide in advance what hymn to sing of a Sunday, and sing it directly over the chorus of humble voices applied to the assigned text”; the “sneaky” Robert Frost, whose machinations against rival poets include “on one unequaled occasion going so far as to ‘accidentally’ start a little fire on stage at Bread Loaf just as Archibald MacLeish was launching into his biggest crowd-pleaser”; and the “mandarin” Marianne Moore, whose poems are “inedible melons.” Walt Whitman—whom Ryan basically describes as a manspreading bro—is not in that number.

Ryan herself will be, if the self-portrait that emerges from *Synthesizing Gravity* is any indication. She likes to say the same thing over and over again (how William Bronk felt about Machu Picchu, that Robert Frost’s “Dust of Snow” is amazing, that

Mozart could compose a concerto instantaneously). She delights in mentally reconstituting bits of trash along the road into their original wholes. Writerly camaraderie depresses her. Instead of trying to fit in, “poets should take the lesson of the great aromatic eucalyptus tree and poison the soil beneath us,” she sermonizes.

Kay Ryan is religious. *Synthesizing Gravity*, her spiritual autobiography, describes a faith that, for all its eucalyptic rigor, is life-giving. If only everyone could lean so lovingly into their own eccentricity.