

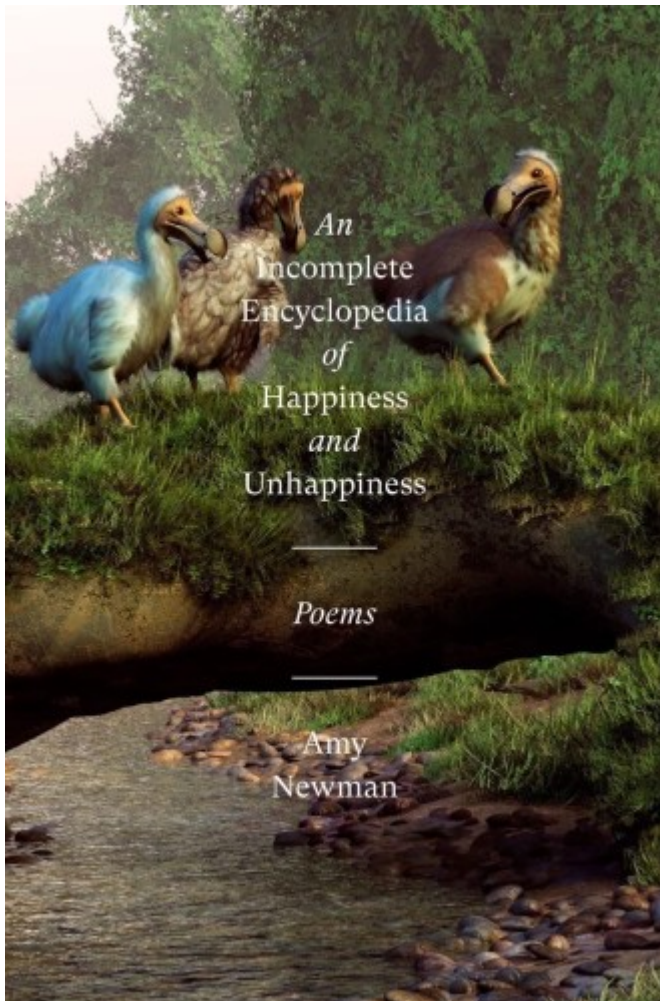
A poetic search for belief

Amy Newman's new collection is less a theodicy and more an apology, a defense of life in the face of imperfection.

by [Lilia Ellis](#) in the [June 2025](#) issue

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## In Review



## An Incomplete Encyclopedia of Happiness and Unhappiness

Poems

By Amy Newman

Persea Books

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Amy Newman's newest poetry collection dwells in the tension between pain and joy as it catalogs a spectrum of human experiences. This is the Northern Illinois University professor's sixth collection and the first since 2016's *On This Day in Poetry History*. The nearly eight-year wait for her next book now feels justified. With *An Incomplete Encyclopedia of Happiness and Unhappiness*, Newman's characteristic control of sound, rhythm, and form is at its peak. Moving deftly across forms—from the pantoum, ghazel, and villanelle to innovations of her own—this collection impresses and delights with playful, sonically rich poems that almost demand to be read aloud.

As its title suggests, this collection is one of exuberance and sorrow alike. The poems repeatedly circle the world's "perfection" and "imperfection," Newman's idiom for beauty and brokenness. How, she asks, are we to make sense of beauty and the richness of life amid so much hurt? What are we to make of "petals bruised to brilliance"? This collection is less a theodicy and more an apology, a defense of life in the face of imperfection, when the good we find exists in spite of bad elsewhere: "Bless the imperfections of the trailing world. / Bless what's left of it, crestfallen, havoc-filled, pretty, / thirsty at the core and tortured with blooms."

Newman finds inspiration in the expected places—Eden and original sin, the crucifixion and the seven last words—but she also takes readers through the everyday and the natural, from grocery store small talk to the brutality of nature's predators. Even poetry itself is a kind of inspiration. At times the collection is remarkably self-aware, questioning the role of poetry and interrogating the limits of poetic form. Newman's "encyclopedia" succeeds in feeling encyclopedic; nearly anything, highbrow or low, is ripe for exploration.

While its contents range widely, the collection's thematic focus gives it unity and coherence. Reading it feels like reading one whole work, poem flowing seamlessly into poem. Across its pages, themes and phrases fade and recur like musical motifs. The result is a kind of invitation to reckon with happiness and unhappiness alongside Newman, as if the reader were constructing an incomplete encyclopedia of their own. What her poems embody is "a fleshy kneeling toward belief," a kind of

discovery that unfolds through poetry itself, with the reader along for the search—toward an answer, but never insisting on one. Incompleteness is a mark of humility but also of openness to new possibility.

Newman pays particular attention to sin and belief, which merit two poem sequences of their own, comprising half the book: *The Sin Sonnets* (previously published as a separate chapbook) and *The Space of Whether God Exists*. Each poem in *The Sin Sonnets* is written in first person, from the perspective of biblical or mythological characters confronting human fallibility. Figures like Icarus and Adam feel at home in a collection that has so much to do with fallenness: “sin makes this second world imperfect stuff.” Their stories are, of course, well-trod material for a poet. But Newman makes them feel fresh with her cleverness and curiosity, breathing new life into old tales. The final sonnet is a kind of surprise, composed entirely of the first lines from the preceding poems—a twist on the sonnet crown. It works surprisingly well, an impressive show of Newman’s talent for formal innovation.

*The Space of Whether God Exists* confronts belief and the place of art. The existence of God is a fitting enough question for a collection about imperfection, but Newman’s unique spin considers God’s existence in light of human creativity, with each poem’s speaker taking on a different medium. One poem offers a poet’s perspective, another a musician’s. Above all, Newman tries to uplift both human limits and artistic prowess: “Oh the human, encircled by things, // always knowing things, and always so wrong, / ever vibrating in the ever vibrating air.”

For fans of Newman, the long wait has paid off. This is a book for lovers of language itself, those who, like Newman, revel in the sound and shape of words. And, for readers who struggle to reconcile the earth’s beauty and hurt, *An Incomplete Encyclopedia* will doubtlessly be a kindred spirit and companion on the way.