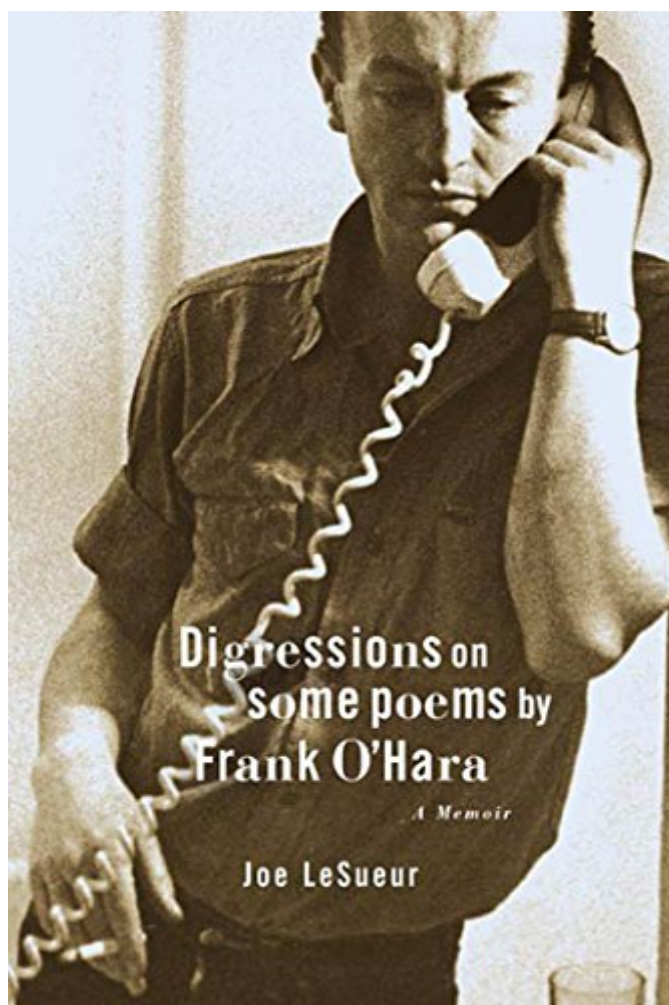


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Digressions On Some Poems By Frank O'Hara: A Memoir



Synopsis

An unprecedented eyewitness account of the New York School, as seen between the lines of O'Hara's poetry. Joe LeSueur lived with Frank O'Hara from 1955 until 1965, the years when O'Hara wrote his greatest poems, including "To the Film Industry in Crisis," "In Memory of My Feelings," "Having a Coke with You," and the famous Lunch Poems—so called because O'Hara wrote them during his lunch break at the Museum of Modern Art, where he worked as a curator. (The artists he championed include Jackson Pollock, Joseph Cornell, Grace Hartigan, Jane Freilicher, Joan Mitchell, and Robert Rauschenberg.) The flowering of O'Hara's talent, cut short by a fatal car accident in 1966, produced some of the most exuberant, truly celebratory lyrics of the twentieth century. And it produced America's greatest poet of city life since Whitman. Alternating between O'Hara's poems and LeSueur's memory of the circumstances that inspired them, *Digressions on Some Poems by Frank O'Hara* is a literary commentary like no other—an affectionate, no-holds-barred memoir of O'Hara and the New York that animated his work: friends, lovers, movies, paintings, streets, apartments, music, parties, and pickups. This volume, which includes many of O'Hara's best-loved poems, is the most intimate, true-to-life portrait we will ever have of this quintessential American figure and his now legendary times.

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Customer Reviews

Joe LeSueur's memoir of his friend and companion, is a truly illuminating portrait of the artist. What makes these digressions so rich and rewarding for the reader, is the unique perspective LeSueur is able to bring to this material. These are LeSueur's memories of experiences and events shared with O'Hara and their myriad of friends and acquaintances. I found this book to be compelling, intimate and inspiring (indeed, "Lunch Poems" and "Selected Poems" were never too far out of reach, and both read from cover to cover). By virtue of having been a participant or, at the very least having been an eye witness to the events depicted, LeSueur has captured not just a time and place, but the essence of a cherished friend. I found myself reading slowly, savoring each passage. By the end of the book I felt I had really gotten to know O'Hara and his circle of friends, and found myself in tears as I read the last few pages. LeSueur's memoir is a tribute to Frank O'Hara as both an artist and a beloved friend.

At Frank O'Hara's funeral, composer Virgil Thomsom turned to the poet's longtime friend Joe LeSueur and said, "Baby, I hope you kept a journal." Though clearly not drawing upon stale journal entries, LeSueur's memoir of his relationship with O'Hara (which survived the vicissitudes of its ever-changing status...friends to lovers to friends, etc.) is a nice blend of personal memories and feverish impromptu research (Brad Gooch's biography seems to have been ever at his elbow). LeSueur is neither vindictive nor pointlessly benign. He truly understood and appreciated O'Hara's central position in the explosion of art that was happening in New York in the 50s and 60s. Unlike Ginsberg and the Beat poets, O'Hara was equally at ease among literary folk, musicians, and painters (especially the abstract expressionists). To read about O'Hara is to read about the greatness of post-war New York. DIGRESSIONS is actually helpful, too. Because O'Hara often adopted a casual, off-hand, personal approach when writing his poems, it is great to have someone who was intimate with the poet to explain "who's who" and "what's what." LeSueur, however, is equally comfortable admitting when he's baffled by an O'Hara reference, and explanations (and reminiscences) are never forced. One other thing--DIGRESSIONS is an enlightening portrait of gay life in New York prior to the Stonewall riots. O'Hara and LeSueur were both openly gay, though they had quite different approaches to meeting their sexual needs. O'Hara seems to have had fewer partners, usually choosing them from his circle of friends and acquaintances. LeSueur seemed to

favor one-night stands and casual sex. Perhaps this difference is one reason their friendship continued long after their sexual intimacy ended. If only LeSueur had lived long enough to write DIGRESSIONS ON GAY LIFE BEFORE STONEWALL.

Joe LeSueur has provided the cultural history of American arts in the mid-20th Century with this seamlessly interesting and informative inside perspective on the important role of Frank O'Hara - poet, art critic, champion of the visual, musical, and literary arts par excellence. DIGRESSIONS ON SOME POEMS BY FRANK O'HARA is not only a clever and viable means to writing a memoir: it provides insights into the growingly important works of O'Hara who some are now ranking as the 20th century version of Walt Whitman as Poet of the City. While many of the poems introducing each chapter are well known to us, it is the window to the world of O'Hara's life and times that is so well served by Joe LeSueur's writing. Frank O'Hara was bonded with such luminaries as Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, Larry Rivers, Joan Mitchell, Jackson Pollock, Grace Hartigan, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Lincoln Kirsten, WH Auden, Kenneth Koch - the list is endless. O'Hara was a behind the scenes observer, never hogging the limelight and in fact avoiding it, always with his keen eye on good art, good music, good writing, and always turning out poems that only now are being read seriously by the general public. Joe LeSueur live with O'Hara, joining O'Hara in his flagrantly 'Out' gay life, hobnobbing with all the other gay artists of his time in a way that makes him the recorder of that important preStonewall age, a time when even the giants such as Aaron Copeland, Leonard Bernstein, Samuel Barber, etc were closeted. At times LeSueur borders on the gossipy side, but that only enhances his subject. What we are left with here is a wonderfully composed tribute to a great artist and supporter of the arts. The overall effect of this book is monumental, and at the same time exceedingly conversational. Very Highly Recommended.

I've read this book twice now and will undoubtedly read it again as I very much enjoy Mr LeSueur's chatty, reminiscent style in describing his time, in the 1950s and early 60s, in New York with Frank O'Hara et al. A delightful read.

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