Julie Moulds, a fierce poet in her own right, died too young from complications of cancer. The love of her life, the poet John Rybicki, bore witness to his wife’s sixteen year struggle with the cancer diagnosis, its treatment, and her ultimate end. It is this journey that has influenced the poems found in Rybicki’s third collection, *When All the World Is Old*. Interspersed with fragments from Julie’s own writing, Rybicki’s work often seems to defy categorization. Though clearly mired in a grief that has not yet abated, the poems are also notable for their rich and soulful language, as a celebratory recollection of a great literary romance, and for the astute depiction of the burdens that an illness can place on both patient and caretaker.

Selected by the Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids and the Poet Laureate Committee.

**About the Author:** About the author: John Rybicki was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan. He is the author of three poetry collections, and individual poems of his have been published widely in literary journals, such as *Poetry*, *The Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Best American Poetry 2008*. When not teaching poetry and creative writing to inner-city children via InsideOut Literary Arts Project and to children who have experienced trauma or loss through Wings of Hope Hospice, Rybicki might be found working in a tire shop, painting houses, or doing carpentry. He lives in Augusta, Michigan with his son, Martell.

**Questions for Discussion**

1. How does the inclusion of Julie’s journal passages throughout the book influence your reading of the subsequent poems?

2. Some of Rybicki’s poems are set outside of the hospital or sickbed, and on the surface, don’t appear to be about his wife or her illness. On closer reading, do you find that these poems still make reference to Julie?

3. It can be difficult to embrace poems about grief or loss if such a trauma has also been experienced by the reader. Rybicki’s work often manages to be both heartbreaking and celebratory at the same time. How do his poems make you feel, and do they put words to any struggle you might have experienced in the past?

**Three Poems that Deserve a Second Look**

“Why Everything Is a Poem,” “On a Piece of Paper You Were About to Burn,” “April 8, 2008”

**More About John Rybicki**


Rules of Thumb for Reading Poetry

Some people love poetry; some people are intimidated by it. In order for the reading of poems to be more accessible, less intimidating, here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind.

1. A poem is like a teabag; if you want the flavor you have to let it steep. That means we can take our time when we approach poetry. A good rule of thumb is to read a poem slowly, repeatedly, and meditatively.

2. Don’t worry if not all poems inspire you. Think of an art museum; you don’t necessarily stop and linger with every piece but only with the ones that make a connection. At first, you may not be able to articulate why a particular painting or sculpture holds your attention; it is only after spending time with it that you begin to put into words what it is that attracts you. So when reading a collection of poetry, focus on those poems that resonate with you.

3. Poetry is different from prose in that it does not necessarily deliver its message in a straightforward way and yet it is still expressive. By way of analogy, think of a symphony. When we listen to a symphony, we enjoy the music without necessarily knowing what it means. The same can be said of poetry. There are ways in which a poem speaks to us that are beyond the semantic sense, beyond what can be easily paraphrased. There may be, for example, a musical pattern to the poem that is more compelling than any interpretation, as in William Blake’s “The Tyger.” Tyger, tyger, burning bright,/ In the forests of the night;/ What immortal hand or eye,/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry? By reading a poem like this out loud, we can better appreciate the rhythm and rhymes that we might miss when we read it silently to ourselves.

4. Poems often communicate through images. Images, by evoking the senses, can make us feel things the poet wants us to feel. Often these can be quite complicated emotions. When Robert Burns says, “My love is like a red, red rose,” this is a very appealing image, and its meaning may appear to be obvious. But when we ask ourselves in what way his love is like a red, red rose, we begin to recognize the richness of the metaphor. We could think of the rose being very red and vibrant, just as love has a certain vitality to it. We could also consider the rose to be delicate or fragile, that even though it is for the moment suffused with color and fragrance these may not be very long lasting; is Burns suggesting that there’s a transience to love that is wonderful while one is in it but regrettably this love (all love) must fade? Burns may even be hinting that since roses have thorns love also can have a sharp edge to it that brings pain. So that in this simple image the poet may be conveying many meanings, wonderful meanings, at once.

5. Poetry is a performance where language plays. Poets play with words, their resemblances, their nuances. Poets want us to celebrate, as they do, the relationship of one word to another, one sound to another, as in “One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.” This phrasing from Dr. Seuss reminds us that maneuvers in a poem are not only clever and entertaining, they’re also very deliberate, so that we can enjoy the intelligence in the design of a poem, whether it be a child’s rhyme like this one or a more mature poetic expression. When we ask ourselves why a poet arranges her words in a specific way or what purpose she has in choosing the language she uses in her poem, we are opening ourselves up to the universe she has created.