

James Merrill: Knowing Innocence (Studies in Major Literary Authors)

By Reena Sastri

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James Merrill: Knowing Innocence reevaluates the achievement of this important poet by showing how he takes up an old paradigm – innocence – and reinvents it in response to new historical, scientific, and cultural developments including the bomb, contemporary cosmology, and the question of agency. The book covers Merrill's full career, emphasizing the late poetry, on which there remains little commentary. Illuminating both Merrill's relation to a tradition of literary innocence from Milton to Blake and Wordsworth to Emerson and Stevens, and his relevance to contemporary cultural debates, the rubric of "knowing innocence" helps us to understand his achievement. Merrill undertakes a career-long effort to know innocence, and develops a thematic and stylistic attitude that is both innocent and knowing, combining attitudes of wonder and hope with reflexive wit, intellectual breadth, and an unflinching gaze at mortality. He ultimately imagines innocence as creative agency, a capacity for imagination, invention, and ethical responsibility. The book demonstrates how, addressing questions of sexual identity, childhood and memory; atomic science, the big bang, and black holes; environmental degradation; AIDS; and the notion of the death of history – while honoring poetry's essential qualities of freedom and play – his poems perform cultural work crucial to his time and ours.

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James Merrill: Knowing Innocence (Studies in Major Literary Authors) By Reena Sastri Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #6011968 in Books
- Published on: 2007-07-13
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.02" h x .75" w x 5.98" l, 1.22 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 258 pages

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