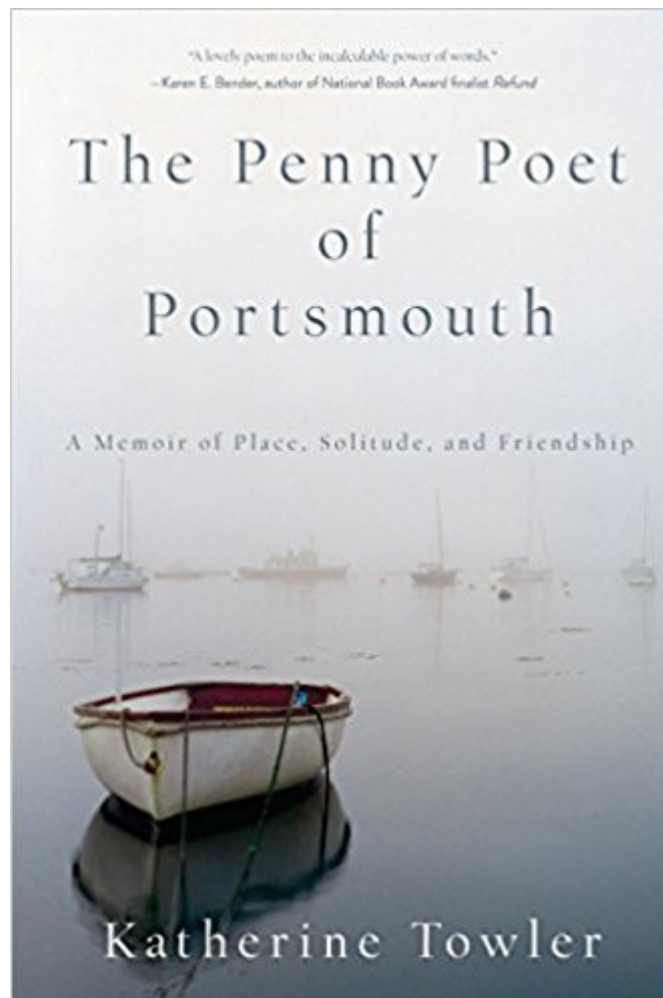




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The Penny Poet Of Portsmouth: A Memoir Of Place, Solitude, And Friendship



Synopsis

The Penny Poet of Portsmouth is a memoir of the author's friendship with Robert Dunn, a brilliant poet who spent most of his life off the grid in downtown Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The book is as well an elegy for a time and place—the New England seaport city of the early 1990s that has been lost to development and gentrification, capturing the life Robert was able to make in a place rougher around the edges than it is today. It is a meditation on what writing asks of those who practice it and on the nature of solitude in a culture filled with noise and clutter.

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Customer Reviews

Praise for *The Penny Poet of Portsmouth*; Katie Towler's lovely memoir is beautifully written, keenly observed, and conveys better than any book I've read the necessary and even urgent solitude of the writing life. —Alan Lightman, author of *Einstein's Dreams* "This subdued memoir is suffused with a benign calm, like a breath of tranquility from a world parallel to our own." —Madison Smartt Bell "A beautifully observed, honest ode to the literary life, the deep connections between writers, the power of solitude, and the work of creation; *The Penny Poet of Portsmouth* is a lovely poem to the incalculable power of words." —Karen Bender, author of *Refund*, finalist for the National Book Award; *The Penny Poet of Portsmouth* is one of the most beautiful and touching books I've read in a long time. It is more than just the portrait of the author's unlikely friendship with Robert Dunn, a fabulously talented, wise, eccentric, and mysterious local poet; it is also the portrait of a small city in the midst of change, and of the art of poetry as it vitally and movingly exists outside the academy and the official avenues of recognition. And most of

all, it's a portrait of the solitude and fellowship all artists need and seldom find. This book deserves a wide and enthusiastic audience." • Alan Shapiro, author of *Night of the Republic*, a Finalist for the National Book Award "The Penny Poet of Portsmouth is a love song to the mysteries of art and friendship. In language that is as sharp as a crystalline winter morning in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, the village that serves as the backdrop of the memoir, Towler chronicles the burgeoning of a friendship as it coincides with her own appreciation of what it means to be a friend. This memoir is an exploration of the human condition and the beautiful, maddening desire to get it all down on the page." • Wiley Cash, New York Times bestselling author of *A Land More Kind Than Home* "More than just an elegy for an exuberant and elusive soul, this graceful book is a meditation on success and dying, and finally, a love letter to the immortal written word." • Mark Sundeen, author of *The Man Who Quit Money* "Katherine Towler's *The Penny of Portsmouth* is a book about a New England town, and yes a book about the friendship of two writers in that wildly populated landscape of solitude, but it is also, in the end, a book that educates us on how to be human living in the world's most awkward empire, how to love life, love it even in our strangest of centuries, love it even when one has no stomach for it, love it in our neighbors, our streets, our solitudes, our antagonists who are (often) ourselves." • Ilya Kaminsky, author of *Dancing in Odessa* "Thanks so very much for the arc of *The Penny Poet of Portsmouth*. It's rare these days but I stayed up half the night that very night reading it, finishing it over breakfast the next day. I've already sent in my Indie Next nomination and will make it a staff pick in March when it releases." • Dale, Porter Square Books, Inc. "A gorgeous meditation on friendship and place, writing and life, and of course the Poet of Portsmouth. I loved every beautiful word." • Ann Hood, author of *The Red Thread* "Praise for *Snow Island* Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers Pick "Luminous and moving." • The Boston Globe "An evocative tale... The carefully chosen, and ultimately spare, language of *Snow Island* belies its quiet emotional wallop." • The Denver Post "An elegant novel... Katherine Towler creates an engrossing atmosphere that feels true to its time and place." • Sun-Sentinel "Lovely... This is the perfect novel to curl up with on a winter's night... and then share with a friend." • Ann LaFarge, syndicated reviewer "Captures the complicated emotions of falling in love for the first time." • The Dallas Morning News "Slow cooking shows in the plausibility of the story, the vividness of the scenes, the depth of her characters, and the poetry of her language... a really fine novel." • The Portsmouth Herald "...graceful"; Towler's strength is her deft rendering of time and place. Lyrical and gentle, Alice's wartime coming-of-age and the island itself continues to resonate after the last page." • Publishers Weekly "A small New England

island in the early 1940s is the setting for this lovely first novel…beautifully written —life on the remote island is easy to visualize and the two stories are smoothly linked.â • —Library Journal“Towler's first novel adeptly personifies loneliness in the self-imposed exile of George Tibbits and the circumstantial solitude of Alice Daggett, both of whom are bonded by a common need for the isolated shores of Snow Island.â • —Booklist“[A] sensitive debut novel...a well-crafted tale, subtle and memorable, that should have a broad appeal.â • —Kirkus ReviewsEvening Ferry"Readers familiar with Snow Island, Katherine Towler's fine first novel, will be further delighted by her return to those hardscrabble New England waterfolk in Evening Ferry: a strong and deeply satisfying tale of the islanders' lives, loves, and losses from the Great Depression of the 1930s to America's war in Vietnam. Readers new to Towler's fiction have a happy discovery awaiting them." — John Barth, author of The Sot-Weed Factor and The Book of Ten Nights and a Night"[Towler] imagines characters and an island life that feel remarkably real. Inner quandaries over love, sex, memories, dreams, and codes of duty are rendered with a light but vivid elegance... by intertwining each era's history and cultural shifts with the stories of individual islanders, Towler is creating a memorable regional trilogy." —The Providence Journal"When one is held in place by the past, the only way to move life forward is to find a way to break those chains. It is such a journey that Katherine Towler places at the center of Evening Ferry. Evening Ferry succeeds in part because the characters tell an interesting story, but also because of the way the novel takes the reader to a world far removed from present experience." —The Denver Post"Towler's two books, with their overlapping characters and philosophies, interlock neatly, like pieces of a larger jigsaw already fully imagined... a compelling achievement." —Boston Globe"Poignant... In a country deeply divided by the Vietnam conflict, Evening Ferry is the calm before the storm." —Curledup.com“As with the first installment, Towler succeeds in bringing the small island community to vivid life, and the introspective characters are sympathetic...it is gracefully written, and the subtleties of family life should keep readers interested in the continuing saga.â • —Publishers Weekly“The unhurried pace, simple and recognizable characters, and lyrical descriptions will draw readers into this Vietnam War-era novel.â • —Booklist"Evening Ferry grips readers, beginning to end, with a gradual revealing of hard and sometimes redeeming truths about characters we truly care about." —The Concord Monitor"The arc of the main characters' lives provide puzzles and also the pieces you need, in the end, to find closure. Evening Ferry has strong characters and surprises. Its sense of place is seductive." —Fosters Daily Democrat"Evening Ferry offers readers a luminous and deeply moving journey back to the fictional Snow Island, the title of Towler's first book... a rich and

satisfying foray into another world." • The Cape Codder "Towler brings a strong sense of place, exquisite pacing and deft characterization to the quahoggers and others whose isolated lives depend on the sea." • Mystic River Press Island Light • Towler's characters are as complex and contradictory as those with whom we live our lives...[she] accomplishes the higher art of bringing us to see the drama in the commonplace, the demands of the ordinary, the conflicts and decisions made by people living the lives we discover in our families, our neighbors, ourselves. • The Boston Globe • Towler succeeds in bringing the small island community to vivid life, and the introspective characters are sympathetic...gracefully written, and the subtleties of family life should keep readers interested in the continuing saga. • Publishers Weekly • Inner quandaries over love, sex, memories, dreams, and codes of duty are rendered with a light but vivid elegance...by intertwining each year's history and cultural shifts with the stories of individual islanders, Towler is creating a memorable regional trilogy. • Providence Journal "A lyrical, passionate, nuanced tale of life on the tiny island... Those familiar with the first two volumes will enjoy re-engaging with the island people, and newcomers will find themselves beguiled with Towler's characters and her thoughtful themes of war, isolation and family." • Portsmouth Herald

KATHERINE TOWLER is author of the novels *Snow Island*, *Evening Ferry*, and *Island Light*, and co-editor with Ilya Kaminsky of *A God in the House: Poets Talk About Faith*. She completed her undergraduate degree at the University of Michigan and graduate degrees in writing and literature at Johns Hopkins and Middlebury College. She has been awarded fellowships by Yaddo, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, and the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, and served as the Bennett Fellow at Phillips Exeter Academy. She teaches in the MFA Program in Writing at Southern New Hampshire University and lives in Portsmouth with her husband.

With breathtaking calm and immaculately measured prose, thought, and sensitive insight, Katie Towler delivers a precious balm to the troubled, distracted and fearful world in which we find ourselves. Read this wonderful memoir, I urge you, and set foot in remarkable poetic and existential terrain, where every pause is freighted with meaning and, I believe, hope for us all. Read this book one chapter at a time with breaks before what follows, seeking, as the Penny Poet of Portsmouth would have it, *Festina lente*, "make haste slowly," a reminder to plod the path of the poet/turtle rather than that of the road of success as measured by contemporary standards. Does Ms. Towler

pine for an earlier age and lament the passing of what went before? Perhaps. But the "ubi sunt" theme zeroes in on a heroic figure, not a heroic earlier age to which the world will never return. She portrays a singular individual, whose personal, idiosyncratic choices lay bare a neglected pathway toward fulfillment, toward integrity, toward thoughtful personal choice, toward supremely focused celebratory presence in the world despite the many daily assaults to reason and hope. Read and share this book, my friends, it will edify and inspire, and promulgate important change for good in our weary world! Thank you, Katie Towler, one who never gave up and never surrendered. Your fan for life, Mark Lawhorn Honolulu, HI

A loving, deep and gentle reflection on the nature of a seaport town, a way of life, a strange and distant soulmate.

Even though I live not far from the poet Robert Dunn's adopted home town of Portsmouth, NH, I'd never heard of him until I recently read an article in a local newspaper, "The New Hampshire Gazette." The article also mentioned this book, and I downloaded a free sample of the Kindle edition, which interested me enough to get me to spend fifteen dollars to read the rest of it. The price seems somewhat high for a Kindle book, but the story fascinated me from beginning to end. The book is a memoir and not a comprehensive biography. There is little about Dunn's life before 1991, when the author, Katherine Towler, first came to Portsmouth, and although Dunn was a familiar figure on the streets of Portsmouth and had many friends, few were close and he kept much to himself. He had a brother and a sister, but they were not interviewed for the book. His life remains largely an enigma. In addition to the biographical aspect, the author is also telling about the friendship between her and Dunn and how he influenced her as a writer and a person. Dunn was a very interesting character, a true poet who cared little for recognition or money. The town of Portsmouth has a storied past, and the stories echo even today to anybody walking its streets. The book captures and conveys the character and flavor of the town, which from her perspective underwent a process of gentrification during the 1990's. She is right about that, but I used to go into Portsmouth frequently during the 1970's, would walk around on a Saturday night and imagine what it must have been like in the 1950's before urban renewal. It's probably always been a town in transition. Fortunately some of the old buildings and streets remain. The book includes a few samplings of Dunn's poetry, and should prompt readers to seek out more.

Just finished it. What compelling reading. I am attracted to books that treat solitude: the Bible, of course; Crazy Cloud Zen; Solitude, Seeking Wisdom in Extremes (the author retreats to an island off the coast of Chile); Rockwell Kent's memoir about retreating to the wilds of Alaska with his son; etc. This book is a compelling addition to the shelf. The story of a man who devoted himself to a deep examination of his interior life in an urban setting, and the story of a writer who (like concert pianists) masters her craft in solitude and is required to practice it in public. Katherine Fowler's writing is so well calculated, it is difficult to put the book down. I've been no fan of the current fad for memoirs; the majority are onanistic exercises that begin with a paucity of meaningful experience and struggle to move very far for such unpromising beginnings. Not this. NOT this. There are so many clearly defined levels to this narrative, each engrossing. And in the end, like any complex story, fact based or not, it all sublimates into something both simple and profound. I know Katherine. I knew Robert. I am so grateful for this opportunity to have so many of my questions about the life of my adopted city answered--or asked better. Sometimes that's what you're looking for: someone to ask the question better.

This is a beautiful book that includes memoir/biography/social commentary/geography. I loved Fowler's Snow Island trilogy, and here we get to know the novelist and something of what it took to write those books, along with her friend Robert, the poet of the title. The prose in this book is just gorgeous, with memorable descriptions on every page. Those from New England or with a fondness for New England will be particularly drawn to the book. For me, as an Ohio resident who has spent time in and yearns for New England, reading this book is, among many other things, a moving visit to very particular town as well as the broader region. There is much here as well for lovers of poetry, students of the craft of writing, anyone interested in the process and impact of gentrification, and people with a host of other interests. The book is a fascinating hybrid that coheres as a satisfying whole. I highly recommend it!

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