

**A review of *Laughing Matters: Poems with a Wink and a Smile*  
by James A. Tweedie**

*Review By Theresa Werba*

This collection of humorous poetry by the excellent James A. Tweedie is more than a mere collection of clever jokings and funny sayings. James Tweedie is reveling in the power of language, and celebrates its gift-giving capacity in the ways in which words and phrases, and even various authors, and styles, and forms can be experimented with, played with, coaxed, and birthed into a fantastic array of poetic expression.

James Tweedie is not only a first-rate poet, but is also a musician and composer, which is very refreshing to me, as I am also both a poet and a musician. You can hear the musicality exuding from his poetry. The meter is clean and precise, the rhymes are perfect, rarely slanted, so you get the full effect of the satisfactions inherent in perfectly-executed formal poetry. But it never upstages the humor and wit of Tweedie's funny perspective, and the results are often quite unexpected! It is very refreshing and satisfying indeed to "hear" the sonorities and the rhymes and meter within my head as I read his work.

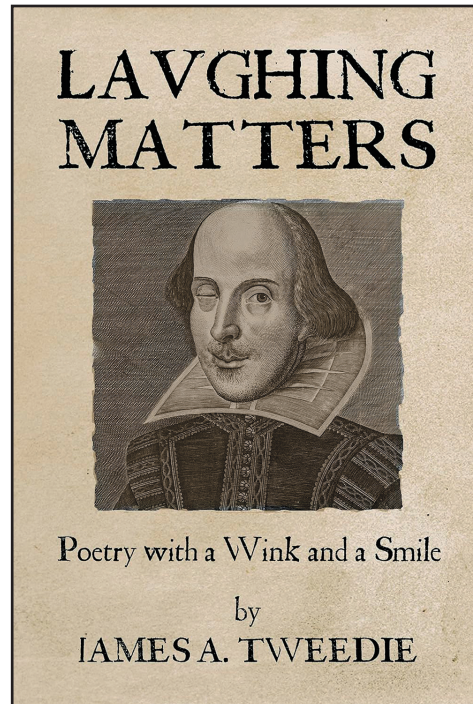
Tweedie is highly creative in his use of form. He employs the traditional Shakespearean form ABAB CDCD EFEF GG plus the variant ABBA CDDC EFFE GG. The opening poem "Fleet of Foot Pheidippides," is an excellent example:

**Fleet of Foot Pheidippides**

*A Grecian runner named Pheidippides,  
From Athens, ran to Sparta with a plea.  
"We need your help to fight the Persians, please!"  
But Sparta sent him back with, "Nosirree!"*

*Two-hundred eighty miles is what he ran,  
For four or maybe five days he was gone.  
But Athens received help from the god, Pan,  
And Persia met defeat at Marathon.*

*Pheidippides, we're told ran all the way  
To Athens to announce that they had won.  
That's why it's called a "marathon" today.  
For twenty-six-plus miles he had to run.*



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*They say he gave the message and dropped dead.  
But why did he not ride a horse, instead?*

He also uses the Petrarchan form (in "I wrote a poem" ) as well as some unusual presentations such as an Anapest Dimeter sonnet, a Monometer sonnet, and a 20-line sonnet variant (as opposed to the traditional 14-line sonnet). He also creates a short piece of prose (in the poem "Doublespeak") from a sonnet by reformatting it, literally disguising the form and structure of the sonnet so it reads like a short essay. Ingenious! Some of his poems also have a Dr. Seuss-like quality to them, the prime example being the alliterative poem "Beastly Betty." You can tell Tweedie was having fun while writing this one!!!

### **Beastly Betty**

*An Alliterative Poem*

*Beastly Betty badly breaks her brother's  
Buttocks with a bat upon his butt.  
Broken, beaten brother barely bothers  
Bellowing at bawdy Betty. But  
Because bad blood between both babe and bro  
Builds baleful bias brought by Betty's bane,  
Beleaguered Bob bestows a bitter blow.  
By blasting boiling bile on Betty's brain.*

Tweedie often groups his poetry into cycles or themes: a sonnet cycle on the Brothers Grimm nursery stories, a set of "Equilateral Proverbs" (where the first and last words of the couplet rhyme), three limericks based on famous poems by Shakespeare and Dante, with the folksong Molly Malone thrown in, as well as a collection of seven riddles. He also has a poem on the death of Edgar Allen Poe, delightfully executed, and a collection of "Groaner Poems" with some truly groan-inducing puns.

There is such a joyous wordplay and reverie in language that exudes from Tweedie's work! What I truly love about Tweedie's poetry is his interesting rhyme combinations. I am delighted when I see such rhyming as *death/shibboleth, if/glyph, tease/Diogenes, oogenesis/diuresis, Guinness/amanuensis, and antipode/postal code*. There is a love of language that just exudes from each poem presented, a reverie and a celebration of the poetic possibilities waiting to be uncovered. It's truly enchanting! I couldn't wait to see what he would come up with next as I read!

I would have to say my favorite poem of the collection is "Don't Say I Didn't Warn You," which sold me on its very first line. Anyone who can put together "A pyroclastic vomit's what I call it;" is a hero in my book!

### **Don't Say I Didn't Warn You**

*A pyroclastic vomit's what I call it;  
An up-chuck from Mt. Shasta's north west side.  
I bet you the last dollar in my wallet,  
That everything that lived beneath it, died.  
The famous Captain Cook saw from the ocean  
Its pillared smoke arising in plain view—*

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*A seventeen and seven-six commotion.  
A record of the last time Shasta blew.  
Now every volcanologist agrees  
That since its active period reappears  
In clockwork cycles of three centuries,  
Its next eruption's due in fifty years.  
Because the end is near, I wrote this sonnet  
To warn you not to build your new house on it!*

I also like this poem particularly because Tweedie employs the rhyme *sonnet/on it*, which I also have used in one my own sonnets.

Another of my favorites is "The Perfect Poem," a perfectly-executed sonnet on the creative process of formal poetry-making:

### **The Perfect Poem**

*There is, I'm sure, in someone's file drawer,  
A perfect poem, written on a whim,  
Perhaps, or, maybe as a simple hymn  
Of thanks and praise to God, and nothing more.  
Or, then again, the poem could express  
The burning passion of a lover's heart,  
A terse description of a work of art,  
Or soul-torn angst amidst some cruel distress.  
All grammar, syntax, perfectly intact,  
Each foot a proper iamb, anapest,  
Or trochee, dactyl, spondee, at its best,  
Each comma in its place, each rhyme exact.  
In spite of flawless tittle, jot, and letter,  
There will be some who think they could do better.*

Anyone who enjoys clever wordplay and creative use of language in novel and unexpected ways would be delighted to have their mind's ear experience the rich variety of form and humorous content in Tweedie's *Laughing Matters*. Highly recommended!

