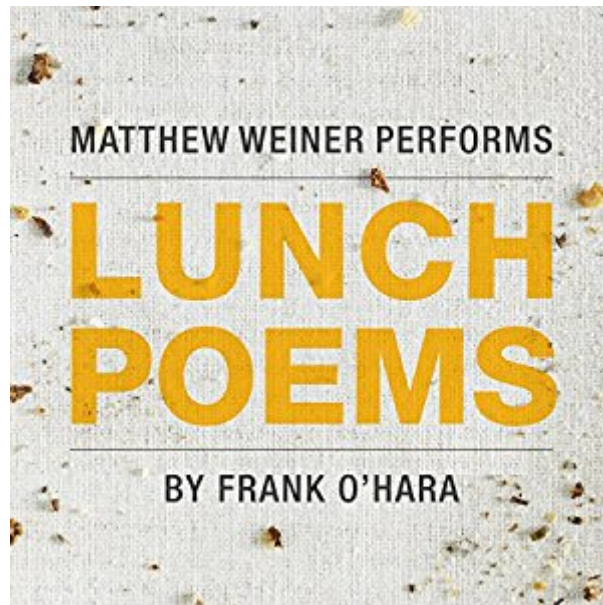


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# Lunch Poems



## Synopsis

Frank O'Hara was a pioneering modern American poet and playwright - an art critic, a musician, and a curator at the Museum of Modern Art - who defined New York City in its post-WWII heyday. For many these poems defined the city's midcentury zeitgeist. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, in remarks on the 50th anniversary edition, said that the poems "established a certain tone, a certain turn of phrase, a certain urbane wit, at once gay and straight, that came to identify the New York school of poets in the 1960s and '70s". O'Hara's wit and cool inspired the creator of AMC's hit television show *Mad Men* decades later - and writer Matthew Weiner performs the poet's work with charm and reverence, adding his own unique spin on the classic material.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Frank O'Hara's reputation seems caught in a holding period, an awkward stage preliminary to his work becoming universal and timeless. Consider, for example, the final scene in the opening episode of the second season of *"Mad Men,"* the cable TV series set in the world of advertising as practiced in New York in the early 1960s. We see the show's protagonist, Don Draper, picking up a slim volume of O'Hara's poems (*"Meditations in an Emergency,"* 1957). He recites the final lines from *"Mayakovsky."* There is an ambivalence to the scene. Was the O'Hara poem chosen for its intrinsic merit, or was the O'Hara name used as an easy marker for the zeitgeist (the same way the show's producers highlight the period-specific cut of Draper's suit and hair and attitudes)? With friends like these, when will O'Hara escape his confinement to the mannerist ghetto of the "New York School"? And so some readers may pick up *"Lunch Poems"* (first published in 1964) after

seeing it praised as an emblematic cultural document of mid-twentieth century America. Yet even if the time-bound aura of O'Hara is the come-on, what makes you stay enthralled is his voice -- a "thinking" voice as vitally American as Whitman or Frost. There are 37 poems in "Lunch Poems" and their quality as well as their accessibility varies. The poems span a period from 1953 to 1964. This book is not a "best of" O'Hara collection, yet it does contain what may be his most durable poem. A few of these short pieces are so recondite that they lose me. In a few others O'Hara raises an opaque scrim to suggest beauty beckoning from the other side, and these poems begin to "click" only after multiple readings. But the majority of the poems are freshly-minted coins granting immediate access to a lively, urbane worldview.

Leonard Lopate, a regular on the public radio station WNYC, was inspired by the BBC series and associated book *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. He asked listeners to vote for the 10 objects that best tell New York's story --- from its first days to 2012. Item number 6, just behind the 18th century ship excavated from the WTC site in 2010 and just ahead of the Brooklyn Bridge, was *Lunch Poems* by Frank O'Hara. I was very surprised, frankly; I had heard and actually seen all of the other items on the list, but this small collection was totally new to me. The Associate Producer of the show, Steven Valentino, was also surprised. "It was slightly surprising that Frank O'Hara's 1964 collection *Lunch Poems* came in at number six on our list, but it turns out to be a very good way of looking at New York City. As NYU professor Lytle Shaw, author of the book *Frank O'Hara: The Poetics of Coterie* explains: 'Lunch Poems is a condensed and highly accessible book that is smaller than a subway map.' That feature makes it easy to take the book anywhere. Shaw described it as having the potential to 'acclimatize you to the things New York has to offer.

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