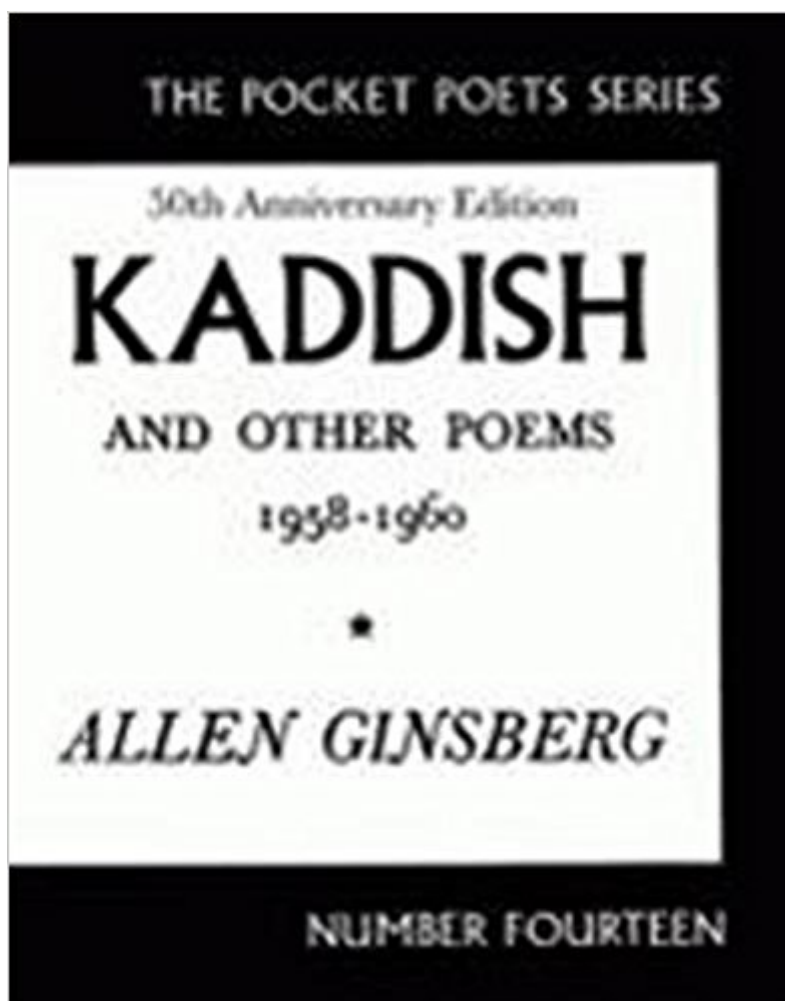


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# Kaddish And Other Poems: 50th Anniversary Edition (Pocket Poets)



## Synopsis

Allen Ginsberg's "Kaddish," a poem about the death of his mother, Naomi, is one of his major works. This special fiftieth anniversary edition of *Kaddish & Other Poems* features an illuminating afterword by Ginsberg biographer Bill Morgan, along with previously unpublished photographs, documents, and letters relating to the composition of the poem. Allen Ginsberg, founding father of the Beat Generation, inspired the American counterculture of the second half of the twentieth century with his groundbreaking poems. Bill Morgan is the author of *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*. He lives in New York City and Bennington, Vermont.

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## Customer Reviews

"Bill Morgan, Ginsberg's biographer, has provided the reader with as thorough an appreciation of context as we are ever likely to get." --The Forward/Zeek Magazine

**Allen Ginsberg:** Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), founding father of the Beat Generation, inspired the American counterculture of the second half of the twentieth century with his groundbreaking poems. His books include *Howl & Other Poems*, *Kaddish & Other Poems*, *Reality Sandwiches*, *Planet News*, *Fall of America*, *Mind Breaths*, and *Plutonian Ode*, all published by City Lights. **Bill Morgan:** Bill Morgan (b.1949) is a painter and archival consultant who lives in New York City and Bennington, Vermont. He is the author of *The Beat Generation in New York* and *The Beat Generation in San*

Francisco, *I Celebrate Myself: The Somewhat Private Life of Allen Ginsberg*, and edited *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays of Allen Ginsberg, 1952-1995*, as well as Ginsberg's *Book of Martyrdom and Artifice: First Journals and Poems, 1937-1952*, and *Howl on Trial: The Battle for Free Expression*.

Appearances to the contrary, "Kaddish" was not a poem that commemorated a life, but one that attempts to exorcise a ghost. The spirit was Ginsberg's mother, a tortured soul who haunted the poet. Kaddish is at its heart a repudiation of a smothering mother, a feckless father, useless brother and antiquated traditions. The poem was an exercise in a kind of separation through sadomasochism. It could be said that Ginsberg was both a product and victim of his time. A transitional figure when transgression was increasingly a means of establishing one's creative reputation. Throughout the work, Ginsberg's slaps at paper tigers, violates wilting standards of taste, and dispenses with fading taboos with ease of washing one's hands. Reading this book today, in our time of profitable exhibitionism and confession without contrition, seems entirely beside the point; it is often quaint, an artifact from a time when blue jeans were a mark of defiance. Ginsberg attempts to speak at the volume of Whitman, but there are degrees of exuberance, and, in his case, he's merely annoying. He's like the man who arrives at a party already drunk and grows only more embarrassing. The words vomit and vomiting appear frequently, and one does not have to be a Freudian to suspect Ginsberg not only finds his memories revolting. Even free verse requires a certain discipline to demonstrate, if nothing else, a degree of sincerity. I read the book to its end and then read each poem again and felt cheated. Kaddish is a kind of Beat Kabuki, its chaos, its incoherence, is part of its form, if not, ironically, its gravitational center. I grew bored with the poems' hipster attitude, namedropping, and Zen and Hindu references. All of it gathered and flung as if Ginsberg knew that no one was paying attention. Yes, Kaddish is occasionally touching, but in Ginsberg hands even intimacy becomes a form of insinuation, which is to say, he manipulates his readers, so that it is his suffering and eventual "satori" that is the poem's subject, and the book, the map of his "hero's journey." It's hard to criticize a work that asks to be read as a poem of mourning and that aspires to the level of prayer. But the more I read, the more I felt the entire work was a kind of hustle, and Ginsberg, a grifter playing on our emotions and deference of the sacred. In the poem "Mescaline," the poet asks, "...who wants to be famous and sign autographs like a movie/ star." The answer is, of course, Ginsberg, who went on to construct a life with the deliberate intensity of a movie or rock star, and who would be famous and sign autographs like a movie star. Over all, the poems share: facile politics, spiritual references without depth, confessions that don't feel heartfelt

and pseudo-poetic speech, all combined with an adolescent's pleasure in vulgarity and profanity. While I thought both the collection and the poem, "Howl" overwrought and self-regarding, the book had at least two poems, "A Supermarket in California" and "In the Baggage Room at Greyhound" I would read again. I found nothing in Kaddish I would revisit. "At Apollinaire's Grave" seemed both dishonest and strangely prescient. (It immediately brought to my mind the filmed, photographed and choreographed photographs of Ginsberg and Dylan at Jack Kerouac's grave site.) There is more than a little borrowed interest buried in Ginsberg's work. The one piece that left me troubled and engaged was the short poem "The Lion for Real." It seemed to succeed in showing real feeling expressed in lovely language. But even when Ginsberg appears at his most sincere he seems to me rather predicable: "The sadness is, that every leaf, /has fallen before. Charming, yes, but when compared with David Ignatow's "I wish I understood the beauty/in leaves falling. To whom/ are we beautiful/ as we go," one sees Ginsberg's sentiments belong more to Hallmark than to posterity. In an introduction to the poems, Ginsberg wrote: "Acknowledged the established literary quarterlies of my days are bankrupt poetically thru their own hatred, dull ambition or loudmouthed obtuseness." He then lists the many magazines where his poems first appeared, which suggests the "[poet] doth protest too much, methinks." In terms of the man's ambition, it seems every bit as fierce and contemporary as that of his generation of Jewish lawyers, politicians and financiers, who broke through the barriers that kept them out of business and academic establishments. At a time when the establishment itself was shuddering, Ginsberg would push himself inside. That said, I think he was as surprised by his success as other committed careerists including Bob Dylan and Andy Warhol. With Kaddish Ginsberg became more than a one-hit wonder; he would avoid obscurity, or worse, passing notoriety. He would be celebrated and become a celebrity. Become, in theory, everything he professed to disdain. Especially telling is a "Note," printed above his acknowledgement. In it he informs us: "Magic Psalm, The Reply, & The End record visions experienced after drinking Ayahuasca, an spiritual potion. The message is: Widen the area of consciousness." For my part, I could not distinguish these poems from any in the collection. Ginsberg's tragedy was that he grew up not only to be a good son, but also a member of the establishment whose work would be part of the new canon.

Good small book. Had this back in the 1960s.

Never having read the title poem before, I was delightfully surprised by the affordability and readability of this compact edition. Minimal editorial comment, but one can find high-quality criticism

on the Internet.

If ever there was a trip through hell as mental illness, this is it. Ginsberg relates the story of his mother, a schizophrenic, and how her struggle shaped his life more decisively than anything else. Written as a lament, it vividly evokes her weird symbolic behaviors, her noises and smells, her struggle with demons. He wonders if she wanted to have sex with him, what it means, how the experience stamped him. This was more horrible, I am sure, than even a gifted poet like him could describe. He even states that, when he tries to make love with a woman, he sees her in his mind. Pretty strong stuff. Recommended. This is the deepest Ginsberg and the best of the beat writing, in my opinion. But is only the horror, in my reading.

Ginsberg's long-form poem about his mother is a beautiful elegy in the form of an ancient Jewish prayer for the dead. It examines the poet's relationship with Naomi Ginsberg and her illness, as well as his own childhood and adolescence. From the Russian girl coming to America in the early 1920's, the socialist mom, to the mentally ill patient in her old age, Ginsberg reviews the life of a remarkable woman and the ways in which their relationship affected his life and work. And affected it did. Kaddish is also a therapeutic work for the poet, almost psychoanalytical at times, a courageous and loving exploration of the profound influence parents can have on a writer's life.

What is the true job of a poet and artist? As an answer one could say that his job is to linger the pain of suffering. The poet becomes a man who brings water to the one who suffers, brings understanding, and widens the picture of reality. This is one of the important things Kaddish is about. Allen Ginsberg wrote this poem to his mother who became insane during his childhood. During her periods of sanity she brought and taught him important values, things to live for, political point of views and understandings, which gave him perspectives for the rest of his life. The poem is also a great political statement against the existential order, normality concerned. It shows us the political implications of Naomi's madness. The poem makes clear that her madness has a connection with the order of modernity in capitalist America. At the same time we are shown the human experience of loneliness that comes out from being left off with the label mad. The sad and unbearable feelings of guilt and anger felt by Ginsberg himself. And over it all something more, something beautiful about the human relation of love between mother and child which is flaming strong through all this horrible prospects of shame and suffering. At the end of the poem and in the beginning, Ginsberg is dwelling with the question of the death of his mother. For him it was in one sense a relief,

but at the same time it was his greatest loss, and the ambivalence of this question goes through the whole poem.

I carry this collection with me literally everywhere and read at least a poem or two from it every day. I feel the poems in this collection are beautiful and charismatic, and sadly the style he used in these isn't seen in many of his other poems. I suppose that's what makes Ginsberg great, every collection offers a little something different. If you like Howl, buy this collection immediately!

I first read this in 1967 on advice of intellectual acquaintances. I tried to understand and appreciate these poems - tried, but just couldn't, and I especially had trouble getting through the long poem about Ginsberg's mother. I felt like he was on the couch and I was in the psychiatrist's chair, scribbling doodles, tapping my foot, and anticipating the finish. My assessment hasn't changed in the ensuing half century. I can't recommend these poems.

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