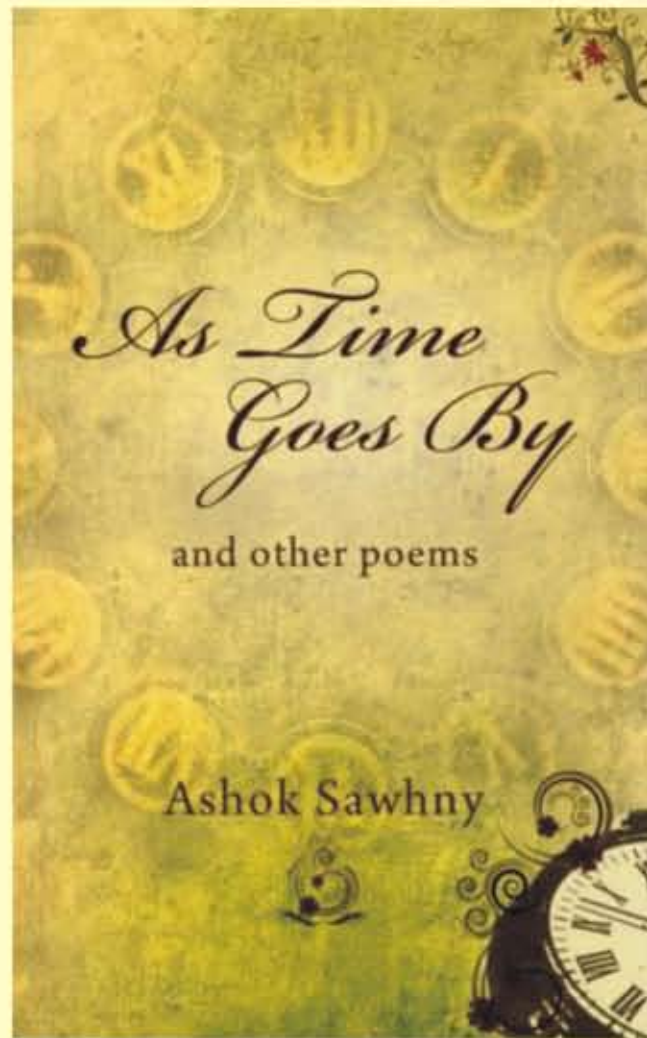


A collection of short lyrics for all occasions

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This is Ashok Sawhny's second volume of poems. It is a collection of 55 poems of uneven lengths and they can be classified into short lyrics, which are for the most part private in nature, and the longer ones which depict the world of public.

The poems are in the nature of description of places, celebration of events, reveries, expression of the poet's varying moods, observations of men and matters, and travelling down memory lane — what Shakespeare calls “the dark backward and abyss of time”— and so on.

Moral voice

What arrests the reader's attention is Sawhny's elegance of style and authoritative moral voice. All that mumbo-jumbo about the totalising vision of history and grand narratives are pooh-poohed in “An Interpretation of History,” with the refrain Where are they now/History took care of them—and how!, mocking at the visions of the grandiloquent events that precede the refrain.

The poem shows the relentless march of time that mercilessly effaces personal pride, power and pelf, echoing the well-known lines of James Shirley that Sceptre and Crown must tumble down. Sawhny gratifies certain known habits of association in our lives.

“Ninety-one Thoughts” is a medley of humorous, comic versions of counsel — like Polonius's advice to his son — arranged in the form of epigrams: Be good with and true to yourself/You can then never be otherwise with others.

The poem “Ecstasy” is a pale shadow of John Donne's poem of the same name. While Donne relies heavily on conceit for expressing contradictory feelings that enrich the poem, Sawhny looks all too pedestrian in his employment of cliché-ridden metaphors.

The only redeeming feature in the poem is the presence of the listener (as in Donne's love-lyrics) and the burden that appears at the end of each stanza. “Who am I” is a poem that raises the overwhelming metaphysical question that plagued even great minds like Ramana Maharshi. The poem has an appropriate end: The answer you may never find/For you have to look within.

Cycle of life

“The Impermanence of Life” is one of the best poems in the collection. The alternate lines in every stanza rhyme with each other, thus establishing the continuity of life in nature's cycle. If life is sustained by the breaths one inhales, the world of nature needs the breaths humans exhale for its existence. Man and nature are thus interconnected. The cycle of life must go on. Hence the poem is a complete volte-face of what the title seems to suggest!

Sawhny is endowed with some natural gifts of expression and sensibility, so necessary for one who seeks the vocation of the poet. He chooses incidents from everyday life and clothes them in natural speech which makes these short lyrics memorable.

The poem “Ordinary Lives,” reminiscent of Philip Larkin's Less Deceived poems is a crowning example. The poet and his pal cycle five miles everyday to go to their work and their journey pedalling together is filled with, not deeply felt joys and sorrows, but the cheery happenings at home. It is these little unremembered acts of give and take that add colour and charm to our otherwise drab existence. Sure, the thought and language in Sawhny's poems afford us a lot of pleasure. What else is poetry for?

AS TIME GOES BY AND OTHER POEMS: Ashok Sawhny; Prakash Books India Pvt. Ltd., 1, Ansari Road, Daryaganj, New Delhi-110002.

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