

READING COMPANION

Kettle Bottom, by Diane Gilliam

Sample poem:

Pearlie Tells What Happened at School

Miss Terry has figured since we are living
in a coal camp, we ought to know geology,
which is learning about rocks. Every day
we got to bring in a different rock
and say what it is. Even our spelling words
is rock words like *sediment* and *petrified*.
Yesterday, Miss Terry says, *Who can use*
"petrified" in a sentence? and Walter Coyle
raises his hand, which, he don't never
say nothing. He's a little touched, Walter is,
ever since his uncle Joe – he was the laughingest,
sparkliest-eyed man you ever seen – ever since Joe
got sealed in at Layland and they ain't never
gonna know if he got burnt up or gassed
or just plain buried. So Walter says,
and he don't never look up from his desk,
he says, *Miss Terry, can a person get petrified?*

Miss Terry thinks he is sassing her, 'cause she
don't know about Joe Coyle, and about
how Walter don't never sleep no more
nor hardly eat enough to keep
a bird alive, as his mama says.

Miss Terry sends him to the cloak room
but Walter, he just walks on out. I reckoned
that was the last we'd see of Walter.

He come back this morning, though, pockets
filled with rocks, and with a poke full of rocks.

Spreads them all out on Miss Terry's desk
'fore she even asks. *Well, alright*, she says,
suppose you tell us what these are.

Walter stirs the rocks around a bit, so gentle,
picks up a flat, roundish one and lays it
agin his cheek. *This here*, he says,
is the hand.

Questions to consider:

1. How does Gilliam juxtapose learned/lived knowledge and taught/book knowledge in this collection? How does this juxtaposition expose and complicate this history? Consider the poems "Sheepskin" and "What History Means to Me."
2. How does the image and symbol of the "kettle bottom" change throughout the collection, from "L'Inglese" onward? Why do you think the author chose this as the title?

3. What is the effect of having many of these poems speak in the voice and point of view of a child? How does this POV change the way information is presented, and the effect on the reader? Consider “Pearlie Tells What Happened at School,” and “Pearlie Asks Her Mama What *Poontang* Means.”
4. How does Gilliam juxtapose Appalachian stories and lore with Biblical stories and phrases? What effect is created by including both? Consider “Raven Light,” “A Reporter From Boston Comes to Lick Creek,” and the book report poems.
5. What do the poems “Samson,” “Good Man in the Mine,” “David,” and “Shelva Jean Tells the Sheriff What She Saw” tell the reader about race and class in this time and place? How?
6. Why does Gilliam tell many of these poems from the point of view of women in Mingo County? What does their perspective show us that the poems from the male POV do not? Consider “The Mother Has Her Say” and the “My Dearest Hazel” poems.
7. How does Gilliam use the repeated images of mountain, rocks, darkness/black in this collection?
8. The first lines of this collection are “Delsey Salyer knowed Tom Junior by his toes, / which his steel-toed boots had kept the fire off of.” How do these two short lines foreshadow the poems and stories to come?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem about a story you have told before, but this time, tell it from the point of view of the “villain,” as Gilliam does in “Beautiful, the Owner Says.”
2. Write a series of poems in the forms of letters. As Gilliam does, do not explain the whole story to the reader. Instead, see how much you can leave unsaid, writing as if the recipient of the letter knows the context.

3. Write a poem using an archetypal story from the Bible or another religious/mythological collection, where the narrator both identifies with and wrestles with the story, as exemplified by how the poem “Raven Light” deals with the story of Job.
4. Gilliam has many poems in this collection written from the perspective of children. Try rewriting one of your poems, changing its current perspective to that of a child.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Gloss, by Ida Stewart

The Wishing Tomb, by Amanda Auchter

The Work of Hands, by Catherine Anderson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

American Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

U.S. History, especially Appalachian History

Appalachian Literature

Ethnic & Gender Studies

Women’s Studies

African American Studies

Working Class Studies / Labor Studies

In 2005, Smith College selected *Kettle Bottom* as its summer reading selection for the incoming first-year class of students as a common read. *Kettle Bottom* has been used in courses taught at over 50 colleges and high schools across the country.

Testimonial:

“Diane Gilliam’s book *Kettle Bottom* is a favorite among my students. It has a ferocity akin to the spirit of the Appalachian people who speak in the poems. The amazing feat of this book is that the poems contain so much drama, so much history, and are rich with Biblical allusions, and gender and social justice issues, and yet they are so easy to read. The emotions for the reader will be stirring, complex, and even complicated. But the language on the page is miraculously straightforward, though consummately ‘poetic.’ I am drawn by the epigraph at the start, which is a fairly famous quote in Appalachian circles. It is by poet Muriel Rukeyser, who visited Appalachia to do research and wrote about 450+ deaths of workers who built the Hawk’s Nest Tunnel in West Virginia in the 1930s. It’s an apt epigraph for Gilliam’s book, which is about deaths of miners around the time of the West Virginia Mine Wars of 1920-21. Yes. Mine WARS. So many forgotten tragedies involving the deaths – and rights and fears and demands – of workers in America. Perhaps deaths at Hoover Dam are well known, and deaths at Mt. Rushmore. But mining disasters, or deaths years and years ahead from silicosis or black lung? Not so well remembered. How many generations will have a Chernobyl, a Fukushima, a Matewan – which is the site of the massacres that happened during the West Virginia Mine Wars Gilliam features in her collection. Rukeyser’s lines, from her *The Book of the Dead*, are, ‘What do you want – a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses? / These people live here.’”

- Susan O’Dell Underwood, *Director of Creative Writing
and Professor of English at Carson-Newman University*

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