

READING COMPANION

The Work of Hands, by Catherine Anderson

Sample poem:

Womanhood

She slides over
the hot upholstery
of her mother's car,
this schoolgirl of fifteen
who loves humming & swaying
with the radio.
Her entry into womanhood
will be like all the other girls' —
a cigarette and a joke
as she strides up with the rest
to the brick factory
where she'll sew rag rugs
from textile strips of Kelly green,
bright red, aqua.

When she enters,
and the millgate closes
final as a slap,
there'll be silence.
She'll see fifteen high windows
cemented over to cut out light.
Inside, a constant, deafening noise
and warm air smelling of oil,
the shifts continuing on . . .
All day she'll guide cloth along a line
of whirring needles, her arms & shoulders
rocking back & forth
with the machines —
200 porch-sized rugs behind her
before she can stop
to reach up, like her mother,
and pick the lint
out of her hair.

Questions to consider:

1. How does Anderson explore innocence and violence through many of these poems? How do the two put together create dynamic tension? Consider "1967" and "What Is Violence?"
2. Does the image and idea of "The Work of Hands" change throughout the collection? Why do you think the author chose this as the title?
3. Many of these poems explore girlhood and womanhood. How does this collection examine and complicate those cultural norms and ideas about them? Consider "Womanhood," "1967," and "We Were Girls."
4. The theme of work, especially manual work, is present throughout this collection. What are some poems that connect with this theme? In what ways do they connect to the theme?
5. Why do you think the collection is broken into three sections? How do the quotes at the start of each section relate to or inform them?
6. In section II, Anderson sometimes writes from the point of view of other people. For example, one persona poem is written from the perspective of a witness to a 1931 lynching, and another from that of a Puerto Rican girl forced to stop school while her brothers continued their education. Self-consciously, she refers to herself as a "white teacher." Use the poems in this section to consider who gets to tell what stories, and why, and to think about the fine line between empathy and appropriation. How might these poems change if written by the subjects themselves?
7. What does Anderson's experience as a teacher, journalist, activist, and advocate bring to these poems? Use examples from specific poems that lend themselves to the ongoing conversation about writing beyond one's own experience, perhaps especially around race.
8. In the first poem of this collection, Anderson writes "*We know the heart will never be finished / wanting the earth, / so we suffer.*" How does this collection use everyday beauty to address suffering, and the question of why we want the earth? Consider the poem "Sky and Rain."

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem using an eyewitness account as your starting point, as Anderson does in "The Witness."
2. Write a poem describing your relationship to a specific place, as Anderson does in "Strange & Beautiful Heart."
3. Write a poem using Anderson's title "Three Acts of Water." Or substitute her noun for one of your own: "Three Acts of _____."
4. Write a poem starting with the line "Or I am my own ghost" from "Three Acts of Water."

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Each Crumbling House, Melody S. Gee

Kettle Bottom, Diane Gilliam

Now in Color, Jacqueline Balderrama

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

American Studies

Creative Writing / Poetry

Ethnic & Gender Studies

Women's Studies

Working Class Studies / Labor Studies

To order *The Work of Hands*, or any Perugia Press title, you may do so through the bookshop on our website: perugiapress.org. For questions about bulk order discounts, course adoption, desk copies, or Catherine Anderson's availability for readings and book talks, contact Editor/Director Rebecca Olander at 413-537-2588 or editor@perugiapress.org.

The Work of Hands - A Response in Retrospect, from poet Catherine Anderson:

Thank you so much for including these probing questions in the Reading Companion. They highlight our effort as poets to engage in a world outside of our experience, especially the experience of race and difference. This artistic project, and the challenges it poses, is one I have thought about for years and carry with me today. As a writer and teacher in the eighties through the nineties, I witnessed many immigrants and people of color portrayed as stereotypes or by dismissive generalizations. As a journalist, I wanted to add nuance, and in particular, I wanted to counter what was seen negatively or not seen at all. As a poet, I wanted to take the exploration deeper, and question my own place in this account of damage within our country. When looking over the poems of that second section of the book, I am sorrowed to realize that all of the crises identified in the poems: racism, poverty, illegal wars, the humiliating experiences of refugees and immigrants, and the oppression of women, are still constant in our culture today. At the same time, I'm buoyed by the resounding uprising against these crimes in the form of national and worldwide protest. I am also struck by the current simultaneity of these issues, how they interconnect – their intersectionality. This is a lifelong project for activists. For poets, the same. The project is not over on finishing a poem. We don't yet have justice in our country.

There are many ways to handle this poetic project I've chosen. Central to it is the discipline of care, respect, and awareness. Sourcing is important, and I tried to provide that as best I could. The book took over a decade to write, was revised a lot, and poems have been shared with a wide range of readers outside my own ethnic community. Another central ethic to the approach I took: In rendering a multiplicity of voices against the background of a speaker seeking to understand, I wanted to make sure the speaker owned her subjectivity, and was clearly identified ("I was your white teacher.") as in the first poem of the series, "What is Violence?" I've always thought of the whole middle section of the book as one long poem documenting our brutal, difficult country, experienced from different angles, but integrated by a questioning speaker.

I like the question regarding empathy and cultural appropriation as it compels deeper thinking about how we process our world, move through images both visual and verbal. In contemporary times, the amplification and accessibility of social media tools are beginning to make a difference in giving voice to many people who have not been heard at any other point in history. Sourcing is also made more accurate due to these tools. When I was writing, one way to illuminate hidden voices was to tell those stories; now, the stories themselves rise out of the wide range of media platforms. This is making a tremendous impact on our cultural and artistic understanding, and it compels empathy, a beginning point for resolving critical issues. Of this book, I would say empathy is present in the poems, but the speaker's recognition of the limits of empathy bookend the first and last poems of that second section, and as well as the beginning and end to the book. Empathy is always merely a starting point, and if not used well it becomes an end in itself, without a cultural context, social background or critique. I think at that point, an author may cross into cultural appropriation. I realize there are other ways of looking at this issue, and that these entry points have changed over the years. I am grateful the discussion has been opened.

- Catherine Anderson, July 2020