

READING COMPANION

The Disappearing Letters, by Carol Edelstein

Sample Poem:

Where is My Animal Certainty?

Where is my animal certainty, those good tunes
I know but cannot carry? Someone has swept up
my terror like so much soft hair from the cutting

room floor, made me a fat, loose braid
to tack to my hat. Go ahead and laugh
at this ridiculous costume, but do step forward,

do tell me what to name a world that eats its own
fortresses like stale pastry, while hungry
cubs come into the cities to scavenge.

I find water, but no honey, and one wheel
that spun off the cart – not a food.
I find the best of families, clusters of fiddleheads

that face each other as they unfurl – shall we
try that? Or shall we just take sun
and be silent a while, listen

to the bees, see how
at the lip of each yellow abyss
they do not falter in their work.

Questions to consider:

1. This collection is divided into three sections: "Hieroglyphs," "Seeing Double," and "Good Old Moon." Where do each of the titles come from, and what sort of progression might there be between each title? Choose a poem from each section and think about how it fits in that section, or how it might fit into a different section.
2. There are many prose poems throughout this collection, including "The Half-Life of Grief" (p. 18), "Memorize This Story" (p. 40), and "When He Wrote Love Letters to Her" (p. 49). How do the prose poems function in relation to the other poems? What does this form of poetry provide or allow for, and what does it leave behind? Define a prose poem using what you observe. Write your own prose poem following the criteria in your definition.
3. "Just Here" (p. 26) is in the form of a villanelle. In what ways is the form appropriate to the content of the poem? How does it reinforce the impact of the poem?
4. The poem "Charm to be Read in the Year 3494" (p. 12) employs the rhetorical devices of anaphora and repetition. How do they function in general as poetic devices? How do these function in the poem, especially in the context of the epigraph?
5. Many of these poems reference darkness and light, in both descriptive and metaphorical ways. Find three examples of how the poet employs images of dark and light, one from each of the three sections, and track how the images change over the course of the book.
6. In "Votive" (p. 58) Edelstein defines love as "You faraway nation." What kinds of love does Edelstein write about? How is love portrayed in various poems, especially without using the word love?
7. Identify poems that reference mothers and fathers, sons and daughters. Babies, children, and adults. How do the relationships present inform the tone of the poem? How does tone shift when the poem is written from the perspective of a child or from that of a parent?

8. In “Last Things First” (p. 46) Edelstein makes the interjection “This is not a poem about my father, but it could be.” How does this line change your perception of the poem as confessional or universal? How does this line change how you, as a reader, interact with another poem in this book?
9. The title *The Disappearing Letters* appears in the last line of the poem “Eye Chart” (p. 4). What does “the disappearing letters” mean in the context of the poem? What other meanings arise when considering the book as a whole?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a still life poem about an unstill scene as in the poem “There Is a Thin, Gold Line Around This Entire Picture” (p. 29).
2. Write a poem that takes place the day before a life-altering event as in the poem “One Summer Day Before We Met” (p. 42).
3. Write a poem about the experience of illness using the poem “Migraine” (p. 33) as inspiration. Think about how the experience of illness alters your perception of the world.
4. Write a one-sentence poem of at least 8 lines. Rearrange the lines to let the syntax create new connections. See “The Next Day” (p. 25) as an example.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

How to Live on Bread and Music, by Jennifer K. Sweeney

Girldom, by Megan Peak

Starshine Road, by L. I. Henley

Sweet Husk, by Corrie Williamson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Women's Studies

Ethnic and Gender Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

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