

READING COMPANION

The Book Eaters, by Carolina Hotchandani

Sample Poem

Portrait of Aphasia on a Burnished Moon

Was it not then, as you thudded over memory's potholes
embarrassed for swerving too late, I searched for ways
that your forgetting echoed mine. A word effaced itself
in a conversation, I told you, and then I caught a glimpse
of my idea's underside, like a deer the darkness hid
till the moon appeared and all I saw was movement.
A flash of being. It was the word "eclipse," of all words,
that escaped me like that furtive deer – its hind legs
springing over brush. I was left with the white tail
of a thought in a sentence: *The moon moved*
into the Earth's shadow, which surrounded my idea
while obscuring it, the way the conifer forest
embraces the deer while sheltering it from human eyes.
Pine needles must have brushed my fragile thought as it left me
and I flushed, like that strange and rare and reddish moon.

Questions to consider:

1. *The Book Eaters* begins with a series of poems about Hotchandani's parents, but eventually incorporates her experience giving birth to and raising her own daughter. How does the way Hotchandani connects herself to her parents compare to the way she connects herself to her child? How does her writing on daughterhood affect the way you read her reflections on motherhood, and vice versa?
2. There are eight "portrait" or "self-portrait" poems in the book. Why do you think Hotchandani chose to make many of her poems portraits? What (beyond the title) makes these poems different, or portrait-like? How do they comment on the ideas of selfhood that are emphasized throughout the book?
3. Several poems in *The Book Eaters* depict literal book eaters — a variety of insects who live in and/or feed on books. How does the role of these insects, and the speaker's perspective on them, shift throughout the collection? What does the description and placement of each individual type of insect, from silverfish to cigarette beetles, convey? How could other subjects of the book, such as Hotchandani's daughter, be seen as "book eaters," and how does this alter the meaning of the term?
4. "Research "Partition" as it relates to India and Pakistan. Consider ideas of borders and dissolution not only in terms of nations but also in relation to family relationships and selfhood. In the poem "Partition," Hotchandani confesses that she doesn't know "how to part the story from the person and keep the person." What do you think she means by that, both in terms of this poem and this book?
5. Many of these poems are self-referential, such as "Eternal Pistachios," which speaks of including turtles in the poem so that they'll be remembered, and "I Keep Searching for the Perfect Metaphor," which speaks to the poet herself searching for

the perfect metaphor. What effect does that lend to the poems in this book? How and when is self-reference a powerful device to utilize?

6. Poems in *The Book Eaters* reference Greek myths, modern philosophers, Jane Austen, and Jesus. Discuss how allusions are woven through these pieces, and what the poet's intentions might be for incorporating them. How do these literary references play against societal ideas/ideals of motherhood and womanhood?
7. The sciences and humanities are often regarded in terms of their differences rather than their similarities. In *The Book Eaters*, the poems "Author Unknown," "Law of Conservation of Mass and Energy," and "Order of Operations" refer to scientific or mathematical concepts. How does Hotchandani use these ideas to reveal emotional realities?
8. Threading is a recurring motif in this collection. In this book, who or what does the threading and for what purpose? How do you think about threading within this book and within poetry, as a device and a possibility?
9. "The Trees that Pointed to Trees," the collection's penultimate poem, ends with "Now that the drama is gone from her story, / the trees will stand for trees alone." How does this pair of lines help to resolve some of the questions and themes that show up throughout *The Book Eaters*? In what ways does it depict the growth of the speaker?

Writing prompts:

1. In poems like "I Keep Searching for the Perfect Metaphor" and "Law of Conservation of Mass and Energy," Hotchandani portrays the experience of writing or revising a difficult poem. In doing so, she creates works of metapoetry. Create your own metapoem — a poem about writing a poem.

2. The poem “An Open Space: *O Espaço Aberto*” is a contrapuntal, meaning that it can be read multiple ways because of its format on the page. Write your own contrapuntal, considering the different meanings that each way of reading could produce.
3. In “Portrait of Aphasia on a Plum Tree,” a word is kicked into a tree; in “Language, A Meal I Thought We Shared,” a word is passed from hand to hand “like a bowl filled with rice.” Write a poem where words are tangible objects, and describe what happens to them.
4. Many poems in this collection are about missing words, or words we can’t remember. Hotchandani uses this technique to depict aphasia, or to consider memory more broadly. Pick a poem subject such as “moon” or “melancholy,” and then write a poem entirely without using that word.

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

American Sycamore, by Lisbeth White

Each Crumbling House, by Melody S. Gee

Hail and Farewell, by Abby E. Murray

Now in Color, by Jacqueline Balderrama

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

Women’s Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

Ethnic & Gender Studies

Latinx Studies

South Asian Studies

To order *The Book Eaters*, 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 Carolina Hotchandani's availability for readings and book talks, contact Editor/Director Rebecca Olander at 413-537-2588 or editor@perugiapress.org.