



Reader's Guide

Author Asks
from Steven Cramer
author of *Clangings*

1. In a passage that helped me keep faith with this project, Louise Glück has written, “the case for nonsense is not the same as the case against meaning.” How does the book make the case that meaning and nonsense can reinforce each other?
2. How does the formal patterning—each five-stanza poem/section rhyming abba—further support that double case, for meaning and for nonsense?
3. David Ferry writes: “One gets to feel, reading [Clangings], that these diagnostically defined ways of using language are only extreme cases of how we all use language.” Consider examples—both in the poems and from your own experience—of ways “we all use language” that are analogous with the speech patterns the book dramatizes.
4. Mary Eagan, editor of Jet Fuel Review, wrote about three of the “clangings” in a blog piece titled “A Poem in My News Feed: Steven Cramer.” How do her comments inform your reading of the book as a whole?
5. What specific emotions—humorous, cranky, dreamy, naïve, mournful, etc.—would you ascribe to the speaker? Do some of those feelings appear in more in particular groups of poems?
6. A friend who reads my poems with great care referred to Dickey as alternately a “he, she, or it.” For me, that “got” a great deal about Dickey’s “identity” and function in the sequence. Where does Dickey seem most a “he,” a “she,” or an “it?”
7. Why are the poems arranged in the particular sections in which they appear?
8. What kind of emotional or psychological “plot”—from first to last poem to epilogue—does the book as a whole develop?
9. I vary the prosodic form of the poems in two places—the last “clanging,” which is only one quatrain, and the concluding adaptation of a poem by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa. What effect do these variations have on the conclusion of the book?
10. As soon as I saw the artwork used for the cover, I knew it was right for the book. If you agree, what about the cover art parallels the poetry?
11. Readers have noticed the influence of John Berryman, Theodore Roethke of *The Lost Son* poems, and even of Lewis Carroll’s “Jabberwocky.” How does *Clangings* make use of, and depart from, those influences?

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Writing Exercises

1. THE NEGATIVE INVERSION (originally devised by Donald Justice)

Choose a poem of around 20-30 lines that you particularly like—preferably a non-linear, highly associative poem. Early Stevens works especially well. Rewrite the poem by copying down the opposite of each word in the poem (except, perhaps, for “little words” like articles and prepositions.) Since most words don’t have exact opposites, the possibilities are endless, and that’s the point. “One must have a mind of winter” might become “He always found his body in the fall” or “Summer? Don’t even think about summer. “Continue through the whole poem, probably not making much sense, but continue writing your negative inversion until you have your own draft. Work quickly on this first draft, letting your unconscious decide the antonyms. Now put the original away and see what you can make of your draft. Look for a sense of place, character, or subject to develop; cut out what you can’t make work; alter details as much as you wish.

2. SCENE OF THE CRIME

Find a descriptive passage in a mystery or crime novel—preferably a passage that leaves out the characters, but with strong atmosphere and details. Copy that passage out and think of it as the descriptive grounding for a poem. Experimenting with line and line break, fashion it around a speaker. Redeploy the details to break free from the source. Braid into the passage parts of unfinished drafts of your own. As you revise your piece away from your source text, try to hold onto the spirit/atmosphere of that source.

Suggested Reading

1. *77 Dream Songs*, by John Berryman (FSG, 1971)
2. *Agnes’s Jacket: A Psychologist’s Search for the Meanings of Madness*, by Gail Hornstein (Rodale Book, 2009)
3. *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, by Kay Redfield Jamison (Free Press, 1993).
4. *An Unquiet Mind: A Memoir of Moods and Madness*, by Kay Redfield Jamison (Vintage, 1996).
5. *Schizophrenic Speech: Making Sense of Bathrooms and Ponds that Fall in Doorways*, by Peter J, McKenna and Tomasina Oh (Cambridge University Press, 2005)
6. *A Beautiful Mind*, Sylvia Nazar (Simon and Schuster, 1998)
7. *The Lost Son and Other Poems*, by Theodore Roethke in *Collected Poems* (Anchor Books, 1974)