

# Sarabande Books

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## Reader's Guide

from Arna Bontemps Hemenway  
author of *Elegy on Kinderklavier*

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### Author Asks:

1. In "The Fugue" it was important to me to try and escape traditional narrative constraints because I felt that they hindered rather than facilitated a realistic rendering of a character's particular experience. How might the non-linear structure used here work to that end?
2. I wrote "The Half Moon Martyrs' Brigade...." with the idea of our twofold voices—as an individual person and as a local community—rattling around the back of my mind. How do you think those two functions of the speaker's voice change the story, or are they distinguishable?
3. In writing "The IED" I think I wanted a form where all aspects of the character's experience were simultaneously accessible to that character's consciousness, mostly because that felt to me more like what life in any given moment is actually like. Still, though, narrative has to be given shape by something. What do you think is the organizing principle that makes this a story instead of just chaos, or is there one?
4. One thing I've always been curious about is the tension between a character's circumstances and his or her self-narrative. How do you think the story "A Life" dramatize this idea?
5. Clearly I chose a strange setting for "The Territory of Grief." Is that setting important to the meaning of the story? How so?
6. In the novella "Elegy on Kinderklavier" I've laid one axis of time in the story (a span of days toward the end of a child's illness) against another axis of time (a span of years in the narrator's marriage). What is the effect that has on the narrative, and how you understand it?
7. One of the things I'm interested in exploring with these stories is the effect trauma has on narrative. How do you think that gets translated into form here?
8. I've been accused of being incapable of writing a happy story. The stuff of these stories is, admittedly, kind of a downer. Do you think that's a weakness of this collection? Do books have a duty to show the best of people's experience, along with the worst?
9. In this book, I am a civilian writing about soldiers' experiences in the Iraq War. Does that change how you read the stories? Does it matter?
10. There are certainly plenty of moments of pain in this book, but I would contend there are moments of beauty as well. Did any of those speak to you? What does it mean to couch the one in the other?

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## Writing Exercises:

### Exercise A.

1. A man and a woman are aboard the Titanic.
2. The woman knows what is about to happen; the man does not.
3. What happens next?  
[Use only two scenes.]

### Exercise B.

1. Using Google, compile a list (from other lists) of the strangest Wikipedia articles in existence. Find ones that interest you, paying special attention to odd historical events.
2. Research one such event; from that research identify a single main character (he/she/it may have to be created from whole cloth) that you are confused or intrigued by.
3. Using the historical event as a triggering premise, create three scenes that allow you to discover something about this character that you did not know when you began writing him/her/it. Pay no attention to narrative arc or plot.

## Further Reading:

### Ten Works That Influenced Me In Writing This Book

*The Age of Grief* by Jane Smiley  
*Remainder* by Tom McCarthy  
*The Mezzanine* by Nicholson Baker  
*The End of the Affair* by Graham Greene  
*Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut  
*Memoryhouse* by Max Richter  
*The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien  
*Iraq in Fragments* directed by James Longley  
*Restrepo* directed by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger  
*The Forever War* by Dexter Filkins

