



Reader's Guide

Author Asks

from **Kiki Petrosino**

author of *Hymn for the Black Terrific*

1. This book contains some poems that are siblings, or twins, of one another. For example: there are two poems about allergies, & two poems about sisters. When you read each pair of poems together, what resemblances & divergences do you notice?
2. The word bloodweed, which appears in "Allergogenesis," really is another name for ragweed, a plant whose pollen causes hayfever. I made up the two other nicknames I use in the poem: chestbane & mulehook. What other properties of allergy are suggested by these names? Do you have allergies? If so, what nicknames would you use to describe their effects?
3. Some of my poems start out as attempts to define a person or thing (ex.: "A sister is..." "The mind of an eater is...") What opportunities for inventive language does this (seemingly academic) practice of "definition" present?
4. In the poem, "Nocturne," the speaker dreams that she is following her ex-beloved as he walks into the forest with his new bride. How does the tenor, or feeling, of this dream inform the message & tone of the rest of the poem? Have you ever had a dream that lingered with you throughout the day?
5. The "Human Beauty" poems came from an assignment I gave myself, to take some rather dehumanizing language from Thomas Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia & transform it into something beautiful. How does Jefferson's original sentence change over the course of this series?
6. I have often drawn inspiration from the process of repetition. Many of my poems employ repeated words & phrases throughout. How does repetition relate to the overall themes of my book?
7. The title of this collection, "Hymn for the Black Terrific," is partially borrowed from Herman Melville. In *Moby Dick*, Melville's narrator describes Captain Ahab as "the black terrific Ahab," as a way of illustrating how Ahab's obsession with the whale has transformed his face/body. What resonance does the color black assume in my poems? Also: is there any evidence of an Ahab-like presence in this book? If so, what obsessions might that voice have?
8. I prefer to use an ampersand ["&"] rather than write the word "and." How does this choice of notation affect your reading experience of my poems?
9. The "eater" moves through a strange landscape in which food takes on powerful importance. In fact, the environment sometimes seems to be made of food (marzipan cellos,

ISBN: 978-1-936747-59-7

Price: \$14.95

Trim: 5.25" x 7.75"

Trade Paperback

209pp

Contact: Meg Bowden
Director of Outreach
meg@sarabandebooks.org

Rights: Sarah Gorham
sgorham@sarabandebooks.org

2234 Dundee Road, Suite 200
Louisville, KY 40205
502.458.4028
www.sarabandebooks.org

Distributed to the trade by
Consortium Book Sales
& Distribution, Inc.
(800) 283-3572



etc.). Why do you think I chose to define my speaker primarily in terms of food & “eating?”

10. My “eater” is afraid, sometimes, to eat too much. She is also worried about eating too little. In these poems, does “eating” refer only to the ingestion of nutrients as fuel for the body? What other life issues, concerns, activities, or circumstances might also be described by using eating as a metaphor?

Writing Exercises

1) THE WHITE WHALE. Think about a word, image, or setting that you often mention in your own poems. [Ex., Do you always seem to write about the beach? Does the color blue show up a lot?] Spend 10-15 minutes doing some focused writing, in any form, about that item. Next, swap notebooks with a partner. Look at what they’ve written about their “obsession.” Spend a further 10-15 minutes writing about your partner’s topic from your own perspective [Yes, you will write in their notebook!]. Now retrieve your own notebook & read through your partner’s thoughts on your topic. Are you surprised by any of the language your partner used to talk about the beach or the color blue? How does it feel to have someone else write about your favorite obsession? The goal of this exercise is to break any old habits or “go-to” phrases you might use in your poems. Your partner’s phrasing may inspire you to hunt your “white whale” in a different way.

2) BOOKS. The structure of my poem, “Books,” is taken from another poet’s book title. A professor of mine, Gregory Orr, wrote a collection of poems called “Concerning the Book that is the Body of the Beloved.” I think about my poem as a series of variations on Orr’s original, but with bits of my own concerns & poetic “personality” mixed in. Think about your favorite book—it should have a good, rhythmic title—& write a poem that varies the title in such a way that a message is communicated. You might want to listen to a piece of classical music, Maurice Ravel’s “Bolero,” to get even more inspired.

Suggested Reading

1. *La Divina Commedia*, Dante Alighieri
2. *Poems*, Elizabeth Bishop
3. *Adventures in Wonderland*, Lewis Carroll
4. *Suck on the Marrow*, Camille Dungy
5. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson
6. *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville
7. *Culture of One*, Alice Notley
8. *Carmen Jones*, Dir. Otto Preminger. Perf. Dorothy Dandridge, Harry Belafonte, Pearl Bailey. 1954. Fim.
9. *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Songling Pu
10. *The Gold Cell*, Sharon Olds
11. *Concerning the Book that is the Body of the Beloved*, Gregory Orr
12. *Hamlet*, William Shakespeare