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Reader's Guide

from Amelia Martens
 author of *The Spoons in the
 Grass Are There to Dig a Moat*

Author Asks:

1. The first poem in the collection is an apology; however, I always tell my writing students not to begin their essays with an apology and I have been told myself never to begin a conversation with an apology. What are the rewards of beginning a collection this way? Do you feel "The Apology" works as the first poem? Why?
2. People have very particular ideas of Jesus. Even people who aren't "religious". I envisioned Jesus as a sort of everyman in these persona poems; however, in some of the poems like "A Hundred Miles from the Border" he is decidedly not a "good" person. In other poems Jesus appears to make value judgments, or just to observe. In which role, within these poems, do you find Jesus to be most compelling as a persona?
3. Although most of the poems in this collection refer to "our daughter", we have two daughters. What would have been lost if *daughter* had been pluralized? What would still work or not work for you in these poems if "our daughter" had been "our son" instead? How does the female gender of the child influence the feeling you get from the poems where she speaks (usually in italics)?
4. How does the form of the prose poem impact you throughout the collection? I see the form as subversive and many of these poems are concerned with current social issues on which we would rather not focus. Does this form work for or against helping the reader to reflect on the issues underpinning many of the poems? Are there particular poems you would prefer to see in lines? Which ones? Why?
5. There are poems that deal with public violence, war, sweatshops and the garment industry, refugees, big pharma and health disasters, food inequalities, global warming, and domestic violence. There are also several poems that involve a young child's obsession with death. Is this book too heavy or dark? Where do you see the light or joy in these poems? Is there a balance? Is a balance even necessary?
6. Several poems involve dialogue, often set in italics. Do you find these spoken phrases/sentences to be necessary and/or authentic? What purpose does the dialogue serve in the poems?
7. There is only one epistle, "Dear Brian Turner", in the collection. Do you see a place elsewhere in the book that could have used another epistle? To whom might it have been addressed? Do you think poems need to come in pairs—or does it work to just have this one epistle?
8. This collection has a long title, *The Spoons in the Grass are There to Dig a Moat*, which is a lot to say aloud. The title comes from a line in one of the poems and I see it as reflecting the prose poem form. What does this title bring to the poems for you? What threads do you see represented in the book's title? If you have to pick a line from another poem to use as the book's title, what phrase or line would you select? Why?
9. Poems involving children are often said to risk sentimentality. This risk seems to intensify when the mother is writing about her children. Are there places in the col-

lection where the speaker devolves into sentimentality? Pick out places where this was a real risk, but does not happen. What keeps those poems from sputtering out into a squishy, sticky, mom mess?

10. The prose poem is generally associated with the surreal. In what ways do these poems fulfill this prophecy? In what ways are these poems not surreal?

Writing Exercises:

Physical Apologies

Think of a situation in which you should have apologized but didn't or couldn't in the moment (maybe the person you were arguing left the house to go get more mouse-traps). Now list 3 items that you would put into an apology if you were going to build one. Consider the apology as more of a collage of physical objects, a sculpture, or a recipe. Write an apology poem that is built instead of spoken. End the poem as the situation ended in reality (or in your reality).

What Would Jesus Do?

Part of the fun of a persona poem is to see with new eyes. Pick a character from history or maybe a religious figure. Take the character out of context. Out of their time and setting. Make a list of activities you regularly engage in—like grocery shopping, washing your clothes, etc. Put your character into this context. You can go backwards in time (What would Hillary Clinton do if she had to eat breakfast in the Dark Ages?) or bring a long dead person into the present. It may help you to use the question form—What would “x” do if....

News is Weird

You don't even need to read the “News of the Weird”. All news is odd to some degree. Turn in NPR and listen for 3-5 minutes to a story. Write down a few phrases or ideas that catch your attention. Do this over a few hours or days. Then go back over your notes. These are seeds. Use the fragments to begin a poem or work the exact phrase (or more than one, from different stories) into your poem.



Further Reading:

1. *The Rose Metal Press Field Guide to Prose Poetry: Contemporary Poets in Discussion and Practice*, edited by Gary L. McDowell and F. Daniel Rzicznek
2. *Bringing the Shovel Down*, by Ross Gay
3. *Who Whispered Near Me*, by Killarney Clary
4. *In the Next Galaxy*, by Ruth Stone
5. *The Ticking Is the Bomb*, by Nick Flynn
6. *The Forest of Sure Things*, by Megan Snyder-Camp
7. *The Narrow Road to the Interior*, by Kimiko Hahn
8. *Incarnadine*, by Mary Szybist
9. *Little Strangers*, by Lisa Olstein
10. *Life on Mars*, by Tracy K. Smith
11. *Phantom Noise*, by Brian Turner
12. *High Water Mark: Prose Poems*, by David Shumate
13. *Year of the Snake*, by Lee Ann Roripaugh
14. *Capitalism*, by Campbell McGrath
15. *Tristimania*, by Mary Ruefle
16. *Why God Is a Woman*, by Nin Andrews

