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## Reader's Guide

### *Author Asks*

from Caitlin Horrocks

author of *This Is Not Your City*

1. For most of the time that I worked on this manuscript, I had no idea how to order the stories. When I received the suggestion to order them by the age of the protagonist, from youngest to oldest, I was relieved just to have some kind of organizing principle, but also excited that the order might help connect a diverse group of stories. As a reader, though, I often skip around in short story collections. Did you read *This Is Not Your City* straight through, or jumping between different stories? How did the order shape your experience reading the book, if at all?
2. Especially if you read the stories out of order, what do you feel links them together as part of the same collection? There aren't any reoccurring characters, and very few reoccurring settings. Did you find reoccurring ideas or themes? Is a story collection different from a pile of stories that happen to all be by the same person?
3. I've written stories with male lead characters, but made the decision to focus this book around women. Immediately, I was worried about the men seeming peripheral, or like their characters existed only as foils to the women. Did you find memorable characters here of either gender? If the men took a backseat in certain stories, did that suit the story, or seem like an omission?
4. Who do you think is the most important character in "At the Zoo"? Does the piece belong to the mother, the father, or the son? All of them equally? As you read, did you develop a firm loyalty to anyone?
5. Why do you think the pirate hijacking is offstage in "In the Gulf of Aden, Past the Cape of Guardafui"? What is the effect on the characters? On the reader?
6. What is the meaning of *This Is Not Your City* as a title for the entire collection? Does it take on a different significance than it has as a story title? Can you make a case for an alternate story that should or could have been the title story?
7. I've visited classrooms where the students have been assigned my story "Embodied," and they are visibly surprised to find me a nice, nonthreatening person, and not a delusional creep. When an audience who'd read "Zero Conditional" found out that I really had taught in an elementary school, but for only one year, some seemed to immediately assume I'd been fired for behavior similar to Eril's. We all know fiction is fictional (and both "Embodied" and "Zero Conditional" are very fictional indeed). But as a reader I can be as guilty as anyone of looking for hints of the real-life author between the lines. Were there certain stories in this collection, or the collection as a whole, that lead you to assumptions about me as the author?
8. Speaking of "Embodied," do you think that the narrator is delusional? Do you believe her, when she speaks about her past lives? Or, perhaps to stake out a middle ground, do you believe that she believes that she has no options beyond the path she takes?

9. In any story collection, I'll have favorite stories and least favorites. In this book, which were yours, and why?
10. Sometimes the story I love best and the one that makes me want to write, to puzzle out some challenge or try something for myself, are two separate pieces. If you're a writer yourself (or most intriguingly if you aren't!), is there a story in this collection that makes you want to write?
11. A former writing teacher once asked me what I was working on, and wouldn't accept "short stories" as an answer. As he pressed for more details, I somehow mumbled the description, "People held hostage by the circumstances of their lives." "That's what all your stories were always about," he said, and my head exploded.
  - A) Do you think he's correct?
  - B) If so, do we all live our lives, the real ones off the page, working within whatever constraints or opportunities are handed to us? A story about characters who live unconstrained by their own lives... well, doesn't make much sense to me, but also doesn't seem that interesting.
  - C) A writing exercise for someone wiser than I am: write a compelling story about someone who isn't trapped by the circumstances of his/her life.

## Writing Exercises

1. I give myself a lot of writing exercises, and when I'm lucky they result in full-fledged stories. "Zolaria" began as an assignment to myself: write a story which has a timeline in the present tense, but then contains both flashbacks and flashforwards, references to events that happened and those that haven't yet, but will. The less-fun second half of this exercise is trying to make sure that your reader will be able to tell what the heck is going on. One draft of "Zolaria" had me crawling around on the floor with scissors, scotch tape, and a sheaf of disembodied paragraphs.
2. I wrote the story "In the Gulf of Aden, Past the Cape of Guardafui" after reading a short news item about an attempted pirate hijacking. This was several years ago, before piracy was widespread, and at the time it seemed wonderfully bizarre, an irresistible setting for a story. To try essentially the same exercise, go to *Reuters' Oddly Enough News* (<http://www.reuters.com/news/oddlyEnough>) or *News of the Weird* (<http://www.newsoftheweird.com/index.html>). Choose a headline, the stranger the better, and write a story in which you deliberately move your focus onto events either before or after the bizarre happening. Think about who your characters are on any day of their lives except the one when the crazy event happened. The writer Haruki Murakami's short story "The Second Bakery Attack" is about a man and woman robbing a McDonald's and asking for nothing but hamburgers. The secret of Murakami's story is in the title: this is the second bakery attack, and most of the story is a re-telling of the long-ago first attack. The past is what makes the present something more than the sum of its wacky parts.
3. The assignment I gave myself when I began the story "World Champion Cow of the Insane": write a story with a happy ending. It's harder than it should be.

## Suggested Reading

1. *Throw Like a Girl* by Jean Thompson. An amazing collection of stories about girls and women, from an angry high schooler to a widow baking pies, angry in her own way.
2. *CivilWarland in Bad Decline* by George Saunders, a constant reminder to not be boring, and that funny is okay in literary fiction. Funny is good.
3. *Boys of My Youth* by Jo Ann Beard. I own multiple copies so I can loan them out and not panic if they never come back to me.

4. *The Hotel Eden* by Ron Carlson. Stories (and a story writer) that taught me a lot, and that I enjoyed a lot.
5. *Collected Stories* by Flannery O'Connor, which needs no explanation.
6. "Paper Lantern" by Stuart Dybek, whose time machine in this story inspired mine in "At the Zoo."
7. I was already working on "It Looks Like This" when I encountered the student report woven through Kevin McIlvoy's *The Complete History of New Mexico*. I figured if his could be that wonderful, there was hope for mine.
8. If you like my story "The Lion Gate," check out Midge Raymond's *Forgetting English*, a collection of stories about women travelling to find themselves, lose themselves, fall in love, or research penguins.
9. Flipping through the *Pushcart Prize XXXV*, I was startled to encounter a character who, for me, could be an alternate, more generous, version of Lyssa in "Steal Small," in Susan Perabo's fascinating story "Shelter."
10. I left Finland with a deep appreciation for cold, and with an abiding love for the Moomin books by Tove Jansson. Read them to your kids, read them to yourself. Beware the Groke.