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Contact: Kristen Miller
Dir. Operations and Outreach
kmiller@sarabandebooks.org

Rights: Sarah Gorham
sgorham@sarabandebooks.org

822 E. Market St.
Louisville, KY 40206
502/458-4028
www.sarabandebooks.org

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Reader's Guide

from Karyna McGlynn
author of *Hothouse*

Author Asks:

1) Like the title of a single poem, the title of a book of poems should prime the reader for the content ahead. “Hothouse” has multiple definitions, including “a heated green house” and “a brothel.” What expectations did you have of the book based on the title? What effect did the cover art have on your interpretation? What about the three epigraphs, or the blurbs, or the typefaces, or the shape of individual poems? What role do these “external factors” play in staging your reception of various poems?

2) I use a lot of first names in *Hothouse*, often without bothering to tell my readers who these people are or how they’re related to me. What is the effect of being tossed casually into a world full of these characters that the speaker acts like you already know—Adam, Russel, Natasha, Michelle, Jeremy, etc.? And how about the use of my own first name in poems such as “Eyebrows,” “Drunk Workshop,” “Caretaker,” “I Can’t Stop Being Performative,” and “The Afterlife of My Lost Blazers”? This is a move that has always fascinated me. Yes, it risks seeming egocentric, but it can also be excitingly vulnerable when the poet rips away the veil of the Speaker and shines a direct—often unflattering—light on themselves. What was your reaction to the first names in this book? What position did it put you in as a reader?

3) Poems about Poetry are often considered a “no-no” (especially since poetry is already accused of insularity and naval gazing) but I sometimes plunge readers—both directly and metaphorically—into the pool of “PoBiz”: poetry professors (“Sensual Vocabulary”), MFA workshops (“Drunk Workshop”), my relationship to the Confessional (“Rented Confessional”), my poetic ambition (“Mortification Montage”), publishing (“Our Books, Our Books”), poetry readings (“The Devil Chains Me to the Microphone”) and my own students (“What Happens in 1918 Stays in 1918”). How do you respond to being thrust into this behind-the-scenes world? What other techniques do I use in *Hothouse* that attempt to break the Fourth Wall?

4) From the very first poem, I’m exploring my relationship with the Reader: “But you, so rare, both reader and lover fused at the stem of a single hothouse violet hidden/ in the very back of my underwear drawer...” The two poems that follow at the beginning of the Bedroom section, seem to address lovers—and, on the primary level, they do—but I intentionally conflate the Reader and the Beloved throughout the collection. This is why the first room (section) in my house (book) is the Bedroom. What is the effect of this assumed intimacy with you, the “Reader-Beloved,” and how does that relationship change over the course of the book?

5) The book is divided architecturally into six sections (or Rooms): Bedroom, Library, Parlor, Wet Bar, Bath, Basement. I couldn’t have included every possibly room in a house, or the book would have been huge! In the end, even some seemingly essential rooms got cut: the kitchen, the living room, the garage, the attic. What do the included rooms say about the architecture of *Hothouse*? Do you think the sequence of the rooms you visit on the tour is significant?

6) My poems tend to have an obsessive relationship to past traumas and humiliations, but they often express these relationships through humor, camp, self-effacement, performativity, and gender caricature. How would you characterize the tension between comedy and drama in this collection? How do the poems use humor to explore gender and sexuality? Try starting with “You Are My New God.”

7) Writers are sometimes told to start their poems or stories in medias res. Still, many poets fall into the trap of exposition. Why do you think that is? In a few of the poems in *Hothouse*, the trap is avoided by beginning the poem in the title. What are other techniques we can use to avoid exposition in poetry?

8) I’ve always been fascinated with the malleability and capaciousness of the “list poem.” That said, the list is a deceptively challenging form—a successful one relies on a delicate balance between repetition and variation. Once the reader discerns the pattern, they are—as George Saunders claims in his essay “Rise, Baby, Rise!”—“subtly ready to be bored” and “suddenly wary that the Pattern may turn out to be all there is.” How do stealth list poems like “Lottery of Bad Apologies” and “Mortification Montage” navigate these concerns?

Writing Exercises:

1) As I did in creating “Tennessee Wedding on VHS,” I want you to imagine finding and playing a mysterious tape/DVD. I imagined seeing the footage of a creepy wedding I don’t remember having. Write what you see when you press “play” in your mind. Is it something you forgot about? Is the footage of a stranger? Is it a revision of something that didn’t go the way it was supposed to? Is it a message from the future? Whatever you see, try to present the footage to the reader cinematically and avoid exposition.

2) I struggled with the poem “Rich Girl Camp Revenge Fantasy” for a long time before I came to the first-person-plural POV (i.e. the collective “we” of the speaker). The problem was that I was kept trying to write the poem in the first person. The “I” pronoun would make sense since I wanted to discuss my own experience getting bullied at summer camp, but it always sounded a little “oh poor me!” The poem had no teeth until I decided to narrate the poem in the collective voice of the Mean Girls. Simple changes in the way you’re thinking about POV can really unlock a problem poem. Take a piece of writing you’ve been wrestling with and try radically changing the point of view, even if it seems dumb or impossible. Just think about Virginia Woolf’s *Flush*—a more or less nonfiction account of Robert Browning and Elizabeth Barrett’s courtship and marriage as told from the POV of their cocker spaniel!

3) We all know that about the strong connection between scent and memory, but when was the last time you let a literal scent be the prompt for a poem? This was my aim when I ordered several cheap perfumes/colognes online that I hadn’t smelled since high school. This little project produced multiple poems that I’m proud of, including two that are in *Hothouse*: “Broken Bottle of Vanilla Fields” (inspired by Coty’s Vanilla Fields) and “You Are My New God” (inspired by Drakkar Noir). Now it’s your turn: sit down with a notebook and a flight of things you haven’t smelled in a long time. Let each scent lead you down whatever rabbit hole it wants to, but make sure to avoid any written references to the act of smelling (e.g. “The scent of magnolia floods my nostrils”). We’re not interested in watching you smell something; we’re only interested in investigating the forgotten pathways that smell opens for you/us.



Further Reading:

Chelsey Minnis, *Bad Bad*
Sarah Galvin, *Ugly Time*
Morgan Parker, *There Are More Beautiful Things Than Beyonce*
Suzanne Buffam, *A Pillow Book*
Dorothea Lasky, *Black Life*
Erika Jo Brown, *I'm Your Huckleberry*
Kenneth Koch, *The Art of Love*
Diane Seuss, *Wolf Lake, White Gown Blown Open*
Rebecca Hazelton, *Vow*
Brenda Shaughnessy, *Human Dark With Sugar*
Lo Kwa Mei-en, *Yearling*
Mary Ruefle, *Trances of the Blast*

OTHER INFLUENCES & RECOMMENDATIONS:

Kate Bush, *The Kick Inside* (Album, 1978)
The Philadelphia Story (Film, 1940)
Cabaret (Film, 1972)
Squirrel Nut Zippers, *Hot* (Album, 1996)
Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Secret Garden* (Book, 1911)
My Favorite Murder (Podcast)
Vegas in Space (Film, 1991)
Virginia Woolf, *Flush* (Book, 1933)

