



## Reader's Guide

from Kyle Minor  
author of *Praying Drunk*

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### *Author Asks*

1. The book announces itself as a collection of “stories and questions” rather than, say, “short stories,” or “stories and a novella.” Is the distinction in any way meaningful?
2. In the prefatory note, the author says “don’t skip around.” Why?
3. Is there any relationship between the book’s two sections?
4. Is the book’s maker the earthbound writer, or the fiery angel, or both, or neither?
5. Why do some of these stories have sequels?
6. The stories use a variety of competing strategies with regard to structure and point of view—subjective, objective, first person, third person, documents, interviews, essays, memoirs, collections of letters, fragments, science fiction, dispatches from the deathbed. Why, how, to what effect? Do they add up to anything?
7. Are there any ways in which these stories are in conversation with one another?
8. Are there any ways in which these stories are in conversation with things outside the book, especially with other works of literature?
9. What does it mean, to grapple with memory, or to reckon with memory? Is memory a singular thing, like a fact?
10. What does time do to memory?

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### *Writing Exercises*

In lieu of creative writing exercises, which I loathe, I offer ten suggestions for opening new realms of possibility in your work:

1. Consider that time in the short story need not be compact, that the story need not start in the middle, that the reckoning at the end need not arrive immediately after the end of the events. All of time, recorded and not, is available to you. Like James Michener, in his novel *Hawai'i*, you can stretch backward toward the origin of things, or like Alice Munro, in her story “Friend of My Youth,” you can end years before the beginning, with news of the unarticulated things that preceded, which, as it turns out, maybe were the cause of everything. Or you can flash forward at story’s end to the end

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of time, or you can begin at the end, or you can try out everything in-between. Time is calling to the writer, saying: Use me.

2. Read Stephen Dixon's novel *Interstate*, in which eight versions of the same event create eight different lives for the speaker. You can keep telling the same story over and over again, turning it over and over to see what else it might yield. Perhaps there are greater treasures your material can offer than one story can bear.
3. Be restless about form. Rigidly restrict yourself to one thing – say, dialogue, or a list, or a repetition. Or consider a one-part structure, or two-, or three-, or four-, or five-. Or a story proceeding in letters. Or an interview. Or a sci-fi story set in Appalachia, that most common of things which you can only make new with greatest effort. Anything.
4. What is the thing you don't want to write about? Write about that.
5. Write what you know, sure. But go into the world and make yourself into a person who is more broadly interested in things outside the self you are now, so you know more, so you have more about which you can write knowledgably.
6. What's the thing people ought not do? In the story, have them do that thing.
7. Have someone break up with you terribly. That's terrible for your life. You'll probably get a good story out of it. It won't be worth it, but use it anyway.
8. What's the family lore? Steal it.
9. Quit your previous religious or moral or cultural system. Alienate everyone who loves you, and thereby test their love and devotion in an unfair way. You'll probably get a writing career out of it. It won't be worth it, but use it anyway.
10. Get into the New Formalist poets who came to controversial prominence in the 1980's. Molly Peacock, Andrew Hudgins, Mark Jarman, Rodney Jones, etc. And their inheritors, as well: Natalie Shapero, Natasha Trethewey, Maurice Manning. Learn all the forms, appropriate all of them, take them to fiction, and don't give them back. When you stretch the proportions, they work just as well for fiction as they did for poetry, and no one will notice the machine you've made, because they'll be so busy feeling things.

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## *Suggested Reading*

*The Never-Ending*, by Andrew Hudgins

*The Never-Ending* contains the two poems – “Praying Drunk,” and “Heat Lightning in a Time of Drought” – which are closest in spirit to the thing I hoped to achieve in this book. My book also takes its title from the Hudgins poem, and the poem itself is a character in the story “Seven Stories about Sebastian of Koulev-Ville.” When I sent the story to Hudgins to read, he said it would have been a better story if the poem had saved the man's life. Wouldn't all stories be better if a poem could save anyone's life?

*The Dew Breaker*, by Edwidge Danticat

*The Dew Breaker* was my gateway drug to Haiti, and to Haitian literature. “Seven Stories about Sebastian of Koulev-Ville” has a couple of hidden tributes to “Seven,” the second story in Danticat's collection. She is one of those writers whose work is an ongoing goad and comfort.

*The Collected Stories of Isaac Bashevis Singer*, and *The Shawl* by Cynthia Ozick

These two writers have so much in common, despite being separated by generation and gender and place of origin. I might add a third book to this cohort, *For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, by

Nathan Englander. I come from a people without a literary tradition. This is the one I hope one day to properly steal. I wish I could join.

*John Cheever Stories*

This book is also a character in my book, in the story “There is Nothing but Sadness in Nashville.” I keep it on the desk while I am writing. It is a fountain of possible future stories, and a model of career-long formal experimentation that doesn’t forget the primacy of human want.

*The Tragedy of Arthur* by Arthur Phillips

A new favorite. A hoax, an inter-textual game, a brilliant chess match with the reader. Arthur Phillips is our modern-day Nabokov.

*Knockemstiff* by Donald Ray Pollock

In some ways, although maybe I didn’t know it at the time, “The Truth and All Its Ugly” is a tribute to the love I have for this book and for the writer who made it.

*Questions for Ecclesiastes* by Mark Jarman

“Questions for Ecclesiastes,” Jarman’s book’s title poem, is another guiding light for my book. It was especially formative when I was writing “You Shall Go Out with Joy and Be Led Forth with Peace,” the first draft of which was a collection of footnotes to the Book of Ecclesiastes. Jarman’s questions so echoed my own questions that I wanted to find a way to become the writer of his work, but it was impossible, so I had to write my own.

*How They Were Found* by Matt Bell, and *The Era of Not Quite* by Douglas Watson

These two books helped me find the courage to abandon strict realism whenever the stories demanded it, and these two writers helped me become a better writer through generous acts of help and friendship. I hope their work soon finds the fame it deserves. My favorites from each book: Matt Bell’s “The Collectors,” and Douglas Watson’s “Against Specificity.”

*60 Stories* by Donald Barthelme

Barthelme’s dialogue-driven stories, and his Q&A stories, and especially “The Emerald,” became unexpected inspirations and models when I was coming to the end of this book. He helped me find a form and a conceptual center for the larger project. Thanks, Don B., now tyrant revolutionary king of heaven. May your revolt continue unabated until I get there, so the prophecies in this book can remain unfulfilled, except the part about blowing fire.

*Time Will Darken It* by William Maxwell

You don’t even have to read the whole book. All you have to do is read the epigraph, which serves as the book’s central metaphor. It is taken from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painter Francisco Pacheco. Here it is, in part:

“The order observed in painting a landscape—once the canvas has been prepared—is as follows: First, one draws it, dividing it into three or four distances or planes. In the foremost, where one places the figure or saint, one draws the largest trees and rocks, proportionate to the scale of the figure. In the second, smaller trees and houses are drawn; in the third yet smaller, and in the fourth, where the mountain ridges meet the sky, one ends with the greatest diminution of all.

“The drawing is followed by the blocking out or laying in of colours, which some painters are in the habit of doing in black and white, although I deem it better to execute it directly in colour in order that the smalt may result brighter. If you temper the necessary quality of pigment—or even more—with linseed or walnut oil and add enough white, you shall produce a bright tint. It must not be dark; on the contrary, it must be rather on the light side because time will darken it. . . .”