



Reader's Guide

from Angela Pelster

author of *Limber*

Author Asks:

1. In Guy Davenport's introduction to *The Logia of Yeshua* he writes that myth "can coincide with truth and be a more vivid and symmetrical presentation of truth." This was an idea that I kept in the forefront of my mind as I wrote. What role does myth-making and myth unmaking play in *Limber*?

2. Related to the question above: there is a difficult-to-define space that lives between fiction and fact and it is my favorite place to write from. Strange things happen in these essays – limbs are glued back onto dead trees, fir trees are found in a man's lung, radio stations change with the movement of the birds, a boy is paralyzed by a freak accident, tree seeds are sent to the moon. Does knowing that these facts are true change your reading experience of the essays? If I had made them up, would your readings of them been different?

3. The art of Bartholomaeus Traubeck that I mention in the essay "By Way of Beginning" can be found here: <http://traubeck.com/years>. Listen to the track entitled *Years* in light of the essay and comment on how it informs your reading of the essay.

4. In "Meditations on a Tree Frog" I discuss the evolution of language and the evolution of love. What do these two things have to do with one another?

5. When I wrote "How Trees Came to Be in the World" I was trying to write an essay devoid of humans – one that acknowledged the existence and importance of life beyond a human-centric viewpoint. Was I successful? Is this possible?

6. One of the questions that essayists, who sometimes deal in the truth of other people's lives, have to ask themselves is: Should I share this personal information with the public at large? The essay "Saskatoons" is about a boy I worked with in a group home. His family failed him, the system failed him and ultimately, the group home failed him. Does this essay justify the revealing of these personal matters?

7. I am a white woman and the boy in "Saskatoons" was a Native Canadian. As a member of the racial majority who has repressed Native peoples for centuries and continues to do so, do I have a right to tell his story? Are there stories that should only be told by those who have experienced them?

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8. In many ways, “Moon Trees” is the black sheep of this essay family. It embraces fiction more than any other essay, and I flat out lie in the very first sentence. Does it belong in this book? When you read it, did it make you wonder about the truth of the essays that came before it, or after it? What role does this essay play in the entirety of the collection?

9. I recently saw one of Vermeer’s paintings for the first time in my life, and it immediately brought me to tears. His commitment to his art despite his poverty, his lack of recognition, and the pressing needs of his family were incredible. “Mango” and “Ethan Lockwood” expressly ask the question of how to love the world, or how to find the bit of evidence that “will be made luminous in the beautiful light.” But at the heart of all my essays is Camus’ opening statement from the Myth of Sisyphus, which is, “There is only one really serious philosophical question, and that is suicide.” How do I explore this idea throughout the entirety of the book?

10. The enormity of time that has come before this present day is staggering, and it is something I have a hard time wrapping my head around. Our simultaneous desire to collect artifacts from times and peoples past and our inability to live lives that reflect an awareness of our existence within time – environmental decimation, lack of planning for the future, failure to learn from history’s mistakes – is confusing. Why do we obsess with finding the oldest living trees, the oldest known artifacts, the oldest examples of “civilization” and yet are unable to see ourselves as part of history?

Writing Exercises:

A Way to Start Writing

Most writers I know don’t like writing exercises. I think it’s because the reason we write is not because someone else gave us a good prompt, but because we saw/felt/believed something we needed to put into words. It began from urgency, not an exercise. Nonetheless, it’s always hard to get going on something new. So if you need help getting started, first of all, sit down and read something you love. There is no substitute for that. Then, do something that inspires you: watch a film that moves you, cry in front of a painting at a museum, take a trip to the science center, visit the zoo. And then write about the things that you noticed, and write about why you noticed them. And what they made you think about.

One of the nicest things about being an essayist is that you get to follow your passions. There is no such thing as a subject you have to write about. You get to write about and think about and research the things you love. So do that, too. Make a list of what you love, what you want to know more about, and then pick one. And start researching. Get some smart friends to talk about it with. And then write. Just write. Stop putting it off and waiting until you’ve done enough research and know what you’re going to say and what it’s all about, just write.

Further Reading:

Annie Dillard: *Teaching a Stone to Talk*

Kathleen Norris: *The Cloister Walk*

Anne Carson: *The Autobiography of Red*

Michael Ondaatje: *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*

Elizabeth Smart: *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept*

Richard Rodriguez: *Darling: A Spiritual Autobiography*

Marguerite Duras: *The Lover*

Guy Davenport and Benjamin Urrutia (translators): *The Logia of Yeshua*

John Berger: *And Our Faces, My Heart, Brief as Photos*