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# Reader's Guide

from Kiki Petrosino  
 author of *Witch Wife*

## Author Asks:

1. The title, *Witch Wife*, resonates with multiple meanings. The “wife” in these poems is, by turns, “witchy” with mysterious powers and filled with uncertainty about her future. In what ways does the book ask, “Which wife?” and to whom (or what) is this uncertainty directed?
2. Despite the title of my poem, the speaker of “New South,” actually remains haunted by the ghosts of the Old South. Even though she lives in this contemporary moment, she finds herself compelled to retrace her ancestors’ path through history. How does poetry enable us to ask questions about the present and the past, and why is it important for poetry to do both?
3. *Witch Wife* contains about 20 villanelles, loosely defined. Why is this particular form so suited to the subjects explored in the book? How would the book be different if these villanelles were collected into their own section rather than dispersed throughout the volume?
4. The poems “Whole 30,” “Thigh Gap,” and “First Girdle” comment on mass media’s obsession with women’s bodies, particularly with regard to thinness. How does the speaker internalize these pressures and what images does she use to convey some of the emotional and psychological impact?
5. The poem, “Twenty-One,” consists of a pantoum in the form of a list of images or emblems that were important to me when I was 21. What is so magical or evocative about this age, and what items would find their way into your own “Twenty-One” pantoum?
6. An epithalamium is a poem celebrating a wedding, but in my poem, “Break-Up-A-Thalamion,” the speaker rebukes her ex. I made up the form, “break-up-a-thalamion,” as an ironic way to discuss the pain of breaking up. What other poetic forms can you “create” to announce, celebrate, or mourn a life event? Remember to give each form a name.
7. My poems, “Young,” “Ghosts,” and “Lament” are line-by-line responses to Anne Sexton’s poems of the same titles. In all three, Sexton’s speaker and my speaker look back on youth as a time of trauma and exploration, but each poem reaches divergent conclusions. What existing poem(s) would you like to “answer” with a response of your own, and how would your piece correspond to, or differ from, the original?

8. At the end of “I Married a Horseman,” the speaker and her husband transform into horses as they grow accustomed to each other. What other images of transformation or metamorphosis do you detect in *Witch Wife*, and why is this possibility so important to the speaker?

9. My poems, “Ought” and “N/Ought,” present opposing perspectives on the question of whether to have a child, but time is the villain in both pieces. How does time open and foreclose possibility for the speaker, not just in these poems, but throughout *Witch Wife*?

10. *Witch Wife* ends with a vision of purgatory. Based on your reading of the poem, and the speaker’s state of mind by the end of this book, do you think the hypothetical next poem in the collection could be called “Paradiso” or “Inferno?”

## Writing Exercises:

### Ancestor Pantoum

Recall the story of a distant ancestor—someone whom you have never met, but about whom you’ve heard at least one tale. Synthesize two sentences about this person (i.e., “She had nine daughters, all with the same middle name,” or “He joined up with the James Gang when they passed through Kentucky.”) Use these two lines to construct the first stanza of a pantoum. Continue the poem, following the pattern of repetition required for the form. You will find that the action of repeating the narrative sentences about your ancestor will push the poem into a more lyrical space, capturing some of the strange music of the original tale while opening up possibilities for new contemplations.

### Sentence / Sestina

My sestina, “Political Poem,” borrows its end words from one of Martin Luther King’s speeches. The original line is, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” Choose one famous sentence from a document, speech, inscription, or other public document. It’s OK if your sentence contains more than six words; just divide the sentence into six fragments and use these as the endings for the lines of your sestina. Rotate these six “word units” exactly as you would with a regular sestina and notice the compositional opportunities afforded by this slight tweak of the traditional form. Don’t forget to compose a three-line envoi at the end of your poem.



# Further Reading:

1. Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid"
2. William Blake, *Songs of Innocence and Experience*
3. John Wilkes Booth, *Last Diary of John Wilkes Booth*
4. Olena Kalaytiak Davis, *And Her Soul Out of Nothing*
5. Rita Dove, *Collected Poems, 1974-2004*
6. David Gray. *White Ladder*. ATO Records.
7. Macy Gray. *On How Life Is*. Epic. Sony Records.
8. Martin Luther King, "Our God Is Marching On!" 25 March 1965. Montgomery, Alabama.
9. Sabrina Orah Mark, *The Babies*
10. Herman Melville. *Moby-Dick*
11. Piero Pelù. *Né buoni né cattivi*. Warner Music Group.
12. Anne Sexton, *All My Pretty Ones*
13. William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*
14. Mark Strand, *Collected Poems*
15. U2. *All That You Can't Leave Behind*. Interscope Records.

