



Author Asks

from *Karyna McGlynn*,

author of *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl*

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- 1 When I tell people that the title of my book is *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl*, people often ask “who’s the girl?” to which I often respond (as if I’m some sort of irritatingly secretive mystery author), “read it and let me know who you think the girl is.” While I do have an answer to the question, I don’t necessarily think it’s the one definitive answer. Who/what do you think “the girl” in the title might symbolize, and why does the speaker insist that she must be killed?
- 2 You may have noticed that I play a lot with form in the book, especially with columns and other non-traditional visual cues in poetry. What function does form play in reading these poems? How might your experience of reading these same words change if they were in a different format? Do you feel that “form follows function” is true in this case? Why or why not?
- 3 In Lynn Emanuel’s introduction she says that the book “takes liberties with our expectations of the acceptable pace and manner of disclosure in a book of poems.” What do you think she means by this? Do you think there is an acceptable pace and manner of disclosure in a book of poems and, if so, how do you think this book defies our expectations in that respect?
- 4 Poems are often identified as belonging to either the “narrative” or “lyric” poetry traditions. A narrative poem is loosely defined as a poem that tells a story, whereas a lyric poem generally relies more on self-expression and descriptions of the poet’s feelings. In which category would you be most inclined to place the poems in *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl*? Why?
- 5 Many poems utilize dream logic, that is, the same sort of “illogical” thinking that surrounds dream occurrences that might seem perfectly normal to us while we’re asleep but bizarre in waking life (e.g. driving to work in a toaster). Find specific examples of dream logic in *1994* that help advance the book. Is it possible to distinguish between the unfolding of literal events in the book and dream logic? How does dream logic enhance the theme of childhood innocence in the book?
- 6 You may have noticed that the book is broken into three sections: “Planchette,” “Visitant,” and “Revenant.” What do these words mean and how do the titles of the sections and their accompanying quotes impact our understanding of the poems they contain? How are the three sections different? Many books of poetry are broken up into multiple sections. Why do you think this is a popular practice?
- 7 If you had to draw some sort of timeline to help chart the events in the book, what would that timeline look like? How

continued on back

many time periods are evoked? How do time and narrative unfold in the world of the book?

- 8** We're taught in school not to conflate the narrative "I" (or speaker) of a poem with the actual poet. Yet, post-1950s (i.e. since Sylvia Plath, Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, etc.) we have come to strongly associate poetry with authentic confession. We often can't help but view poems as real accounts of the poet's feelings, desires, secrets and life experiences. Some readers have viewed the poems in *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl* as highly confessional, whereas others, like Lynn Emmanuel see it more as an "appropriation biography" in which I use the language we've come to associate with confessional poetry without actually revealing any real information about myself. What do you think?
- 9** I sometimes describe the book as a "film noir," and, in fact, use a quote from the film noir classic *The Lady from Shanghai* as the book's epigraph. What is film noir and what elements does *I Have to Go Back to 1994 and Kill a Girl* share in common with this particular cinematic genre?
- 10** The dominant tone of the book is dark and foreboding—after all, it involves murder!—but it is also playful, ironic, even humorous in parts. The title alone embodies these multiple tones: it announces an intention to "kill a girl" but it also tends to make people laugh. Find other places in the book that utilize similarly contrasting tones. What effect do these moments have on your overall interpretation of the book?

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Writing Exercises

*from Simone Muench,
author of Orange Crush*

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Exercise 1: The Sonnet

I love assigning the sonnet via the bouts-rimes, as a way of getting more collaboration and interaction. I usually spend about fifteen minutes with my students discussing possibly rhymes for the exercise (I encourage alternating between straight and slant rhymes). Once everyone is in agreement, they are given creative latitude to stretch their rhymes however they see fit. (For example, one of my recent students, instead of employing the final couplet of “vasoline/kerosene” instead wrote “vasoline/care or seen.”) “her dreaming feet” arose out of a bouts-rimes class exercise. My students selected the rhymes and I wrote one as well in a gesture of solidarity. However, I abandoned some of their initial rhymes, and they will probably not forgive me for forgoing to rhyme “compass” with “jackass.” Another way I approach writing the sonnet (this is an exercise I use for myself as well as for both literature and creative writing courses) is to engage in a madlib exercise, using the exoskeleton of one of Karen Volkman’s fabulous sonnets. I excise all of the exciting language and leave only the husk of the sonnet form for us to fill in the blanks.

Exercise 2: Poem Stipulations

An additional exercise that I enjoy doing, and often assign to students, is group construction, in which student groups create 4-8 stipulations for a poem form. The idea is to work from the inside out, and the outside in, by creating a form that will then be utilized to write a poem, so that one is privy to both the architectural and imaginative sides of poem-building. It’s fun and extremely challenging. Invariably, I get some of my best class poems from this exercise. I often do this exercise when I feel as though I’m in a syntactic rut. Here’s the breakdown of the exercise for the classroom:

1. Divide class into groups of 4-7 students. (really, you can divide them however you like, but I tend to think this range is the best).
2. Each student is responsible for coming up with one or two stipulations (depending on group size) for the form of a poem (for a total of 7-8 rules). The trick is that every group member has to also agree to each rule.
3. Though I let them decide the rules, I stress that they need to create rules about punctuation, stanzaic construction, diction, etc.
4. Out of the 7-8 rules they agree on as a group, they get to decide on one that is optional.
5. They then each have to each abide by all of the rules and create a poem from it.
6. I usually spend class time going over each of the rules, to decide if anything is too difficult for all the students to accomplish. For example, I usually suggest that they make the hardest rule (say writing in terza rima) the optional one.
7. Listed below are a couple of group examples for rules that my students have created.

continued on back

Group 1

1. Can't use and, but, or, the, a, an
2. Can only use colons and dashes as punctuation, nothing else
3. Use the following words: bouncing bess, virescent, shale, japanese black pine, salt, brassiere
4. Create kennings (melding words together to form a new meaning like "onionlight")
5. Bleeding title
6. Has to ask a question in the poem
7. Has to use a quote from another poet

Group 2

1. Use the following words: cable car, musk, tendril, and Czech glass
2. Punctuation has to be a slash / and open punctuation, i.e. (or { or [etc.
3. It has to be written in a persona
4. At some point, words have to touch both margins
5. There must be 1-3 fully capitalized words
6. There must be a neologism
7. Use an excerpt from a real conservation

For writing exercises from other Sarabande authors, visit our website at www.sarabandebooks.org.

Suggested Reading

Julio Cortazar, *Save Twilight* (trans. Stephen Kessler); *Hopscotch; Blow-up and Other Stories*

Ed. Penelope Rosemont, *Surrealist Women*

Robert Marteau, *Salamander* (trans. Anne Winters)

Joyce Mansour, *Screams* (trans. Serge Gavronsky)

Emily Dickinson, *Final Harvest*

Robert Desnos, *22 Poems* (trans. Michael Benedikt); *The Voice* (trans. by William Kulik)

Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan* (trans. John Felstiner)

Pablo Neruda, *Residence on Earth* (trans. Donald Walsh)

Wallace Stevens, *The Palm at the End of the Mind*

Benjamin Peret, *From the Hidden Storehouse: Selected Poems* (trans. Keith Hollaman)

Marina Tsvetaeva, *Selected*

El Lissitzky and Vladimir Mayakovsky, *For the Voice*

Margaret Atwood, *Selected Poems II*

Harryette Mullen, *Recyclopedia*

Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*

Yusef Komunyakaa, *Pleasure Dome*

Ronald Johnson, *The Shrubberies*

Other Recommendations and Influences

Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*

Carol Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws*

Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*

Joss Whedon, *Buffy*

Coline Serreau, *Chaos* (film)

Mervyn LeRoy, *Gold Diggers of 1933* (film)

Bo Arne Vibenius, *Thriller: They Call Her One Eye* (film)

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