



Reader's Guide

Author Asks
from Lauren Shapiro
author of *Easy Math*

1. I use humor a lot within my poems, but not always to make light of a situation. How do you think humor can be used as a tool to get at larger truths?
2. Popular culture has always been important to me as a way to explore the environment of the speakers in my poems. How does popular culture both inform the narrators' realities and cause confusion or distrust?
3. Many of these poems contain dialogue. What is the effect of the use of dialogue in these poems? Do you think it resolves issues or creates more questions than it answers?
4. Many of these poems (such as "Rule Book") pose questions directly to the reader. What is the effect of involving the reader in this way?
5. In my editing process, I am constantly trimming down my poems, with the effect that some endings may seem a bit abrupt or deadpan. What is the effect of a more "flat" ending, such as the ones in "What to Do", "Hotel", "The One Hundreds", or "After a Long Day"?
6. Math, or logic, or the lack of logic, plays a role in this collection. How do the speakers in these poems attempt to find logic, and what is it that thwarts them?
7. Some of these poems are fable-like. How can the form of the fable be used to seek truths or make statements in these poems?
8. There is a tension in these poems between the serious and the ridiculous. How do the narrators in these poems attempt to reconcile contemporary political issues (for example, wars) with their day-to-day celebrity-infused lives? How is this conflict demonstrated?
9. Some narrators in these poems poke fun at themselves even while they address large social or political issues. Do you read this as a lack of confidence or as an attempt to find themselves within their often chaotic surroundings?
10. Some poems include historical figures, such as Nostradamus ("A Day in the Life"), Isaac Newton ("History Lesson"), or Clara Barton and Florence Nightingale ("The Encounter"). What do you think is the purpose or effect of including these figures alongside the likes of more pop culture icons like Martha Stewart, Britney Spears, Oprah, and reality TV figures?

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Contact: Kristen Radtke
Director of Marketing
kristen@sarabandebooks.org

Rights: Sarah Gorham
sgorham@sarabandebooks.org

2234 Dundee Road, Suite 200
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502/458-4028
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11. I'm very interested in tone in poetry and often try to employ wildly different tones in my poems—from sarcastic to ironic to serious. Tonally, how do you read this collection as a whole?

Writing Exercises

1. I love the exercise in which I ask students to compose a poem with unconventional materials—no pens, pencils, paint, and nothing that approximates paper. It forces students to pick and choose their words, to isolate a stand-alone image, and it creates excitement, which is what poetry is all about. I've seen everything from photos of French fries in the cafeteria to misty shower stalls.

2. I also love exercises that get students out of their own heads a little. I am not the narrator in most of my poems, and this is an important lesson for beginning writers. I like giving students identities (woman who just lost her son to cancer, man who just stepped onto his first airplane) and asking them to describe a particular object or scene from that perspective.

3. I'm also a fan of utilizing the weirdness of Craigslist. I pick a major city (New York, San Francisco) and print want ads for my students. They have to develop a character from the want ads. Then several of their characters have to meet and interact. You'd be amazed what fun and strangeness comes from this.

Suggested Reading

In no particular order, here are some books that come to mind:

Franz Kafka, *The Complete Stories*

Sarah Manguso, *Siste Viator*

Dean Young, *Elegy on Toy Piano* and *Primitive Mentor*

The French Surrealists

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from the Underground*

Kenneth Koch, *Collected Poems*

George Saunders, *Pastoralia*

Suzanne Buffam, *Past Imperfect*

Dobby Gibson, *Skirmish*

Jack Spicer, *The Collected Books*

Mary Ruefle, *Selected Poems*

James Tate, *The Eternal Ones of the Dream*