The Argonauts Study Guide

The Argonauts by Maggie Nelson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Summary

The following version of this book was used for the creation of this study guide: The Argonauts, by Maggie Nelson. First Edition, 2015. 2016, by Graywolf Publishing.

The book is a continuous stream of thoughts, reflections and writings by the author: there are no chapter or section breaks. In general, the style is one of relatively short paragraphs, ranging in length from one sentence to around 20, each separated by extra blank space. There are frequent interjections of quotes from, and/or references to, other writers.

The book begins with a discussion of the value of words, outlining how the author sees them as a primary means of both communication and self-identification and how her partner sees them as limiting, more of a boundary than a freedom. The author then begins her examination of, and commentary on, her various areas of interest. Her exploration of family dynamics begins with discussion of her process of bonding with her stepson, and continues throughout the book with considerations of her relationship with her mother, Harry's relationship with his, and primarily her relationship with her own child. This is one of the book's main considerations, as the author moves back and forth in time from her experience of pregnancy to her experience of her son's illness shortly after his birth and finally, as the book concludes, to the moment of his birth. At this point, the author's interest in family relationships climaxes, in that the narrative of the birth is intercut with narrative of Harry's mother's death.

Another aspect of the author's considerations and writings is the way in which individual identity develops. Although there are references to how identity can be inherited (i.e. through genetics or the teachings and mentorings of more mature individuals), the author's main emphasis is on the individual's role in developing his or her own identity – or, even more specifically, the role of choice. There are two primary examples of how the author explores this theme. First, in relation to her own choices and experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, and second, in relation to Harry's choices and experiences of transitioning from being female-identified to being male-identified. The author also explores these entwined transformations in another way: as contemplations of body and body image, as defined by biological gender and by society's conditioning about how that gender is to be both perceived and treated. A related issue to both these issues is the author's exploration of sexuality – how the genders experience sexuality, how expectations affect that experience, and again, how individual choice rather than societal preconceptions should, arguably, be the guiding principle in defining what gives pleasure and meaning and what doesn't.

Throughout the book, the author draws both explicit and implied comparisons between the perception of life as a journey, and the perception of life as a process of becoming. The former appears in frequent references to circumstances implied by the title, "The Argonauts" being a reference to a mythic group of sailors on a heroic search. The implication here is that individuals in the process of defining their own identity are, ultimately, on a heroic search of their own. The latter, a perception of life as a process of

becoming, is referred to specifically in the book's opening section, and is repeated both directly and indirectly throughout the book. The book ends with a beginning: an expression of the hope and optimism the author feels in the aftermath of her son's life beginning, of his first metaphorical steps on his own wandering journey towards his own identity.

Part 1, Pages 3 – 16

Summary

The author begins by referencing the time at which this story begins (October, 2007), and continues by quoting a conversation with an unnamed female friend, in which the friend suggests that the author have “hard to get” (3) tattooed on her knuckles (3). This leads the author to address “you,” referring to the moment when the author said “I love you” (3). This leads to a discussion on the power and value of words, including a reference to intense conversations between the author and “you,” in which the author advocated (and practiced) the search for words to communicate as exactly as possible, and in which “you” argued that words, by definition, were forever limiting and un-exact. Narration reveals that “you’s” gender identity is changeable, and that sometimes s/he is referred to as “Harry.” There are further discussions of how words for gender identity are, as Harry has argued, limiting and defining, and how lesbian-oriented writers like Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes refused to use gender pronouns when referring to the people whom they loved.

Narration jumps forward to a point at which the author, Harry, and Harry’s son are living together. The author describes a ritual game called Fallen Soldier that she plays with Harry’s son. This game includes a ritual monologue for the author when she is pretending to be the Good Blue Witch. The author then places this period of adjusting to domestic life with Harry and Harry’s son in two contexts: the first, of California’s vote on Proposition 8; and the second, within considerations of the history and meaning of domesticity. This last is triggered by a friend’s comment, recent to the book’s being written, that a large coffee mug was the most “heteronormative” (13) thing she’d ever seen. This leads the author to contemplation of how the concept of heteronormative came about and evolved, and of how it includes considerations and contemplations of pregnancy (which, in turn, include contemplations of the birth of the author’s child, Iggy). There are also contemplations of gender, its meaning and function in identity and in relationships.

Authors quoted in this section iclude: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Roland Barthes, Michael Ondaadtje, Gilles Deleuze / Claire Parnet, Eileen Myles, Susan Fraiman, Judith Butler, Jacques Lacan, D.W. Winnicott, and Denise Riley.

Analysis

The first point to note in this section is the intriguing, and perhaps paradoxical juxtaposition of the friend’s comment about the author being hard to get (a phrase that generally refers to someone being difficult to know, get close to, or become intimate with) and the author’s reference to expressing love to her partner.

There are also initial statements of some of the book's key themes. The first relates to the book's exploration of the nature and value of words. There is the sense here and throughout the book that for the author, words are a fundamental means of both personal expression and clarifying self-perception – of identity, of values and philosophies, and of insight and understanding. This is in clear and vivid contrast to the views of the author's partner, a contrast that seems, from what the author says, to at times erupt into conflict that ultimately results in what results from her analysis here: the author holding onto her beliefs and values while, at the same time, respecting the beliefs and values of others. This, it seems, is a fundamental aspect of her philosophy of being human, and of being in a relationship: the primacy of individuality, and of the individual's right to choose.

The second initial thematic statement relates to the book's exploration of gender and sexuality, arguably an even more dominant theme. Much of the book is taken up with similar contemplations to those here: examinations of previous academic thinking on gender issues juxtaposed with narrative of the author's lived experience dealing with those issues. The references to the "heteronormative" coffee mug are also developments of this theme.

Meanwhile, the discussion of the author's experience of childbirth introduces one of its central narrative (as opposed to thematic) elements. The author's experience of pregnancy and childbirth forms something of a narrative spine for the book, a kind of through-line – almost a plot. The thematic and emotional climax of this line of thinking and analysis is reached at the point of the author's narration of the actual birth.

Finally, there is the reference to Proposition 8, a question placed on a referendum ballot in California that asked the public to vote either for or against the legalization of same-sex marriage in the state.

Vocabulary

incantation, reverential, incapacity, corrosive, malice, plethora, motley, retraction, sobriety, sordid, maniacal, aspiration, eradicate, binary, interlocutor, inherent, domesticity, vindication, acquiesce, reactionary, ontology, postpartum, recipient

Part 2, pages 16 - 30

Summary

The author begins this section with commentary on the happiness she felt spending time with Harry in the early days of their relationship, at the same time questioning whether society's emphasis on reaching for, and holding onto, happiness is the best way to experience life. She then reflects on a real-example of a couple (poet George Oppen and the woman who became his wife, Mary Colby) who felt commitment, love, and connection enough to sustain a relationship without marriage, but who chose to get married in order to be legally safe and secure. She then explores the impact of the writings of D.W. Winnicott on her perceptions of, and choices around, being a parent.

This section continues with a contemplation of both what it means to be a stepparent, and the beginnings of the author's attempts to be a good stepparent to Harry's son. Here there are sections in which the reader is directly addressed, other sections in which the author seems to be directly addressing Harry (using the term "you"), and other sections of straightforward narration. This brief section then transitions into a contemplation of the decision, made by the author and Harry, to get married: it had not been in their plans, the author writes, but the impeding passage of Proposition 8 spurred them on. Initially unable to follow through on their plans because of similarly minded crowds at the local courthouse, they finally got married at the "Hollywood Chapel on Santa Monica Boulevard" (24). The author describes a rushed ceremony that left them weeping and "besotted" (25) with their luck, a feeling that, the author writes, dissipated by the end of the day, at which time Proposition 8 had passed, ending same-sex marriages across California. This, in turn, leads into a contemplation of what the author sees as the strangeness of the term "same-sex marriage … whatever sameness I've noted in my relationships with women is not the sameness of Woman, and certainly not the sameness of parts. Rather, it is the shared, crushing understanding of what it means to live in a patriarchy" (25). This, the author suggests, is also linked to the desire to be heteronormative, referring to the strangeness of queer people wanting to be admitted to "two historically repressive structures: marriage and the military" (26).

The author then discusses the need for, and value of, queer activism continuing to disrupt (rather than be absorbed by) traditional cultural or societal values, and the need for re-evaluating the value and meaning of terms like "radical" (27) and "queer" (29). She uses an invitation she received to speak at a Christian educational institution as a springboard into contemplations of what queer means, meant, and should mean, referencing in detail the teachings and experiences of writer and mentor Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The author then describes how she realized that on principle, she supported the individuals at the institution to express their sexuality however they chose: she then adds that its refusal to acknowledge evolution, which she firmly believes in, eventually led her to refuse its invitation to speak.

Authors quoted in this section include: Deborah Hay, Audre Lord, Sara Ahmed, Elizabeth Wood, Susan Sontag, Leo Bersani, Pema Chodron, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Analysis

The first part of this section illustrates the author's tendency, and apparent intention, to question and examine traditional ways of thinking and acting when it comes to roles within some of society's fundamental relationships – marriage, partnering, and two different kinds of parenting (biological and step). There is the sense here, as there is throughout the book, that the author is searching for personal truth, as related to both previous academic (objective) analysis and contemporary personal (subjective) experience. There is also the sense, here and throughout the book, that for the author, the latter carries more weight. A key example of this lies in her exploration of marriage: on the one hand, she seems to clearly suggest that marriage, as an institution, is unnecessary for a healthy, engaged relationship, but then almost immediately turns around and portrays herself as being powerfully moved by the experience of GETTING married. This sort of dual-sided experience, and interpretation of experience, continues throughout the book – see, for a particularly powerful example, the author's commentary on abortion in Section 8 and in Quote 13). A sense grows throughout the narrative that while the author repeatedly argues against the principle of life and choice being governed by the concept of the binary (i.e. two ideas existing in opposition), she does seem to advocate the principle and experience of dichotomy (i.e. the idea of two ideas functioning not in opposition but in parallel, or in co-existence).

Meanwhile, there is an important reference to the term "patriarchy." This is a term frequently used in contemporary sociological thinking on various aspects of cultural oppression, a term referring to the historical fact that for centuries, societal function has been governed by male perspectives, attitudes and actions. The term has also come to include the idea that that governance has also been restricted to the Caucasian, the educated, the heterosexual, and the middle aged (for the sake of this analysis, the term can be considered to include those aged 35 and older). Many of the author's arguments and analysis are formulated and expressed in opposition to the patriarchy, a situation that is sometimes expressed overtly, and at other times clearly implied.

A final point to note: the author's ultimate response to the invitation to lecture at the Christian institution. This decision includes the recognition of the right of any individual to determine how they want to express their sexuality, a key principle and value upon which the author bases both her life and her analysis in this book. There is a clear sense here of the author having the courage (and the integrity?) to look at, and respect, the behavior of others through a lens of something that she herself places as a priority: the right to individual freedom of choice. Here again, the principle of duality, as opposed to binary, comes into play. In other words, for her the students at the Christian school have as much right to choose their means of sexual expression and identity as Harry does, and as she does herself. They can be free to disagree: the principle of freedom remains the same.

Vocabulary

articulate (adj.), imperative (n.), discourse (n.), ostensible, paradigm, resurgence, prohibit, phallocentric, gravitas, delinquent, hermeneutics, sacrosanct, impediment, recalcitrant, teleology, indefatigable, officiant, secular, communal, felicitous, patriarchy, compatible, symposium, doctrinal, regressive, consensual

Part 3, pages 30 - 46

Summary

The author describes how, in the early stages of her domestic happiness with Harry and Harry's son, there were also difficulties: illness in both their families, and tensions between them arising from Harry's struggle with security and comfort in gender. The language here directly addresses Harry as "you."

During this time, the author writes, she thought a great deal about George Oppen and Mary Colby, whose life she came to believe was too happy to be credible; she found herself, she says, searching for flaws. She eventually found them, she says, in stories of Mary's long-standing inability to discuss with George the experiences of pregnancy and giving birth, an experience that, the author says, she can identify with. The author writes of finding echoes of this belief in the work of feminist writer Luce Irigary, and refers to Irigary's solution: "have a fling with the philosophers" (39).

The author then describes, at length, a seminar she attended while in the early days of her time in graduate school. That seminar, she writes, featured debate between a pair of female philosophers, Jane Gallop and Rosalind Krauss. The former, the author says, discussed the philosophical values of being a new mother and being photographed with her son: the latter, the author then says, essentially took the presentation of the former completely apart, essentially "shaming" her (42). For that very reason, "in the face of such shaming" (42), the author says she came down on Gallop's side: this, she adds, was before she (the author) had had a baby, or even thought about having one.

This leads the author into consideration of her experience of mothering Iggy, including coming to terms with her right, as a parent, to responsibly touch and care for his body, and to love him in the way she chooses to. She also wonders why so many books on raising infants (including the one by Winnicott, the one she most respects) are written by men. She then further contemplates Winnicott's use of language, referring to how he tends to describe even the most intense and complicated experiences with simple language that is somehow detached from overly intense feeling. This perspective, the author suggests, avoids becoming overly involved in concepts and instead focuses on individual realities.

Authors quoted in this section include: D.W. Winnicott, Michael Snediker, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Peter Sloterdijk, George Oppen, Mary Colby, Luce Irigary, Jane Gallop, Rosalind Krauss, and Wayne Koestenbaum.

Analysis

Important points in this section include the author once again applying personal principles and values to her evaluation of a particular moment or incident, in this case the confrontation between Gallop and Krauss. Here the author clearly comes down on

the side of being anti-shame, the suggestion being that however much she might have agreed or disagreed with Krauss (or, for that matter, Gallop), the way that Gallop handled the situation goes against what appears to be the author's fundamental advocacy for treating others, no matter what their value or position, with respect.

Meanwhile, as the author continues to explore thematically central issues of gender (i.e. sexual identity) and the nature and value of words, she continues to insert footnoted references to the work of other writers and thinkers. There is the sense here, and throughout the book as this practice develops and continues, that the author is taking considerable pains to portray her thinking and conclusions within a continuum, or context, of other similar thought and analysis. There is also the sense that the juxtaposition of her personal experience, as well as her thoughts and insights, with the ideas of so many other writers and thinkers creates a full and complex examination of the issues being discussed. The reference to philosophers here seems particularly apt, as the author is starting to come across as something of a philosopher herself, but one with a slightly different perspective. Whereas traditional philosophy seems aligned with, or focused on, looking at life in terms of ideas, she seems to be looking at ideas in terms of life.

Vocabulary

ludicrous, luminous, proportion, vestige, schadenfreude, trajectory, efficacy, treatise, extricate, obliterate, esoteric, discursive, louche, mediocrity, excoriate, lineage, aesthetic, tacit, narcissism, pugilist, profundity, stalwart, enema, anecdote, partition, buoyant, teleology, histrionic, rhapsodic, plausible

Part 4, pages 46 - 55

Summary

Narration switches to present tense, third person as the author describes giving a first draft of the book to Harry (who, for the first time, is also referred to by the male gender pronouns “he” and “him”), who becomes unhappy with the way he is portrayed and how resentful the author becomes. “How,” she asks both Harry and the reader, “can a book be both a free expression and a negotiation?” (46). This section concludes to how the author realized, as she was contemplating the possibility of writing a book with Harry, that writing had defined her individual identity for so long that she wasn’t yet ready to let it become something else.

Narration then switches back to past tense as the author describes her tendency to talk a lot both in her life and in her teaching, which leads her to consider a lesson on silence taught by writer Anne Carson, in which silence is described as leaving room for God. This lesson, the author writes, once influenced her deeply, but now is no longer effective: she cites a circumstance in which a transgendered student gave her a piece of writing by his mother in which the mother mourned the loss of the daughter she once had. This, the author writes, led her to an outburst of anger which she shared with Harry. Narration now becomes direct address, as the author writes of how Harry (“you”) reminds the author that she had similar feelings of grief and loss when Harry started to go on male hormones (testosterone, referred to as “T”). The author concludes that all her fears about what might happen to Harry as a result of going on T ended up unfounded, saying that every time she gave Harry an injection, she felt like she was giving a gift.

This leads the author into a consideration of labels in language, or the language of labels. In her experience of gender-fluid sexuality, there are those who don’t want labels of any kind, seeking instead to just be themselves – or to be instead identified as simply “becoming” (53), in a constant state of moving from one condition of being to another. She coins the term “identitarian,” itself a label, to identify those whose relationships with others are defined by the label of an identity. She concludes this analysis by referencing composer John Cage, who suggested that identity is defined by getting OUT of the “cage” (55) of identity. “The Argo’s parts may get replaced,” the author comments, “but it’s still called the Argo.”

Authors quoted in this section include: Anne Carson, Beatriz Preciado, Lucille Clifton, Judith Butler, and John Cage.

Analysis

Important points to note in this section include the use of gender-specific pronouns to refer to Harry, a shift in narrative style that, on some level, suggests that the author

found Harry's response to be particularly male in quality and attitude. Looked at from this perspective, there is the sense that the juxtaposition of this bit of narration with the reference to Harry's going on testosterone might not be coincidental. This, in turn, makes the author's reference to the injection of "T" as a gift not only compassionate and tender, but potentially also ironic.

Also important is the author's reference to how writing defined her individual identity (a different aspect of the book's thematic interest in the nature and value of words), and the concept of the relationship between words and silence. This latter, while another evocation of the book's thematic interest in words, seems to suggest that God is a shorthand term for something that is simply other than what is said: something implied, something imagined, something intuited, something spiritual – perhaps even something that comes from the reader. Another element of this section related to the book's themes of identity is the reference to the Argo which, here as elsewhere, evokes the idea that the quest for identity is akin to the heroic quest of the sailors on the mythic ship Argo.

A final point to note is the presence of John Cage on the list of individuals quoted in this section. Where many of the other individuals quoted throughout the book are primarily thinkers, philosophers, or writers, Cage is primarily known as a musician and composer, albeit one with a particularly innovative, individualistic style of composing. As such, he is simultaneously somewhat unique in the list of people quoted in the book and, on a philosophical level, a good fit with the author in terms of how they both perceive the value of, and necessity for, individual determination and expression of identity.

Vocabulary

copious, marginalia, sanctimonious, plenitude, dissertation, excision, bravado, ominous, precept, orthopedic, pilgrimage, homage, transitive, asymptote, pontificate

Part 5, pages 55 - 70

Summary

The author begins this section with a recollection of a female elder she encountered at an all-woman public baths when she was younger – specifically, her recollection of the woman's aged body, including her dangling labia. She reflects on the rejection of elder females, and of elder female bodies, by both society and literature, referring to a number of similar women in her past (and in her writing, particularly in this book) as her "sappy crones" (57). She describes one such woman in particular detail: one of her graduate school teachers, Christina Crosby, a strong and attractive woman whose privacy about her personal life and whose teaching methods were both eventually disrupted by students and the public who felt that these aspects of her example were inappropriate to the feminism-based ideas she was teaching.

This leads the author into a discussion of the simultaneous values of plenitude and finitude, "that which is more than one, and more than two, but less than infinity" (62). The discussion begins with a description (addressed to Harry as "you") of their attendance at what the author calls an "art porn film" (62) which led to an intense discussion about whether the imagined is real. Later, in a return to addressing the reader, the author discusses the work of the artist, teacher, and writer Catherine Opie, whose self-portraits of self-cutting in words and images, and whose discussions of involvement in sado/masochism, are juxtaposed with images of her becoming a parent, and as such, struggling to find the time for other, non-parenting activities. "There is something profound here," the author comments, "which I will but draw a circle around for you to ponder. As you ponder, however," she continues, "note that a difficulty in shifting gears, or a struggle to find the time, is not the same thing as an ontological either/or" (65).

The author then goes on to discuss the value of adults keeping their bodies to themselves, referencing several works that explore how the majority of references to young female sexuality in literature are associated with rape, or abuse. She then extends this idea into considerations of adult female sexuality – specifically, into a detailed exploration of a particular piece of analysis by psycho-therapist Sigmund Freud that de-sexualized a woman's pleasure at a particular sex act. This leads the author to address Harry (again as "you"), describing how she enjoys sex with him, and how grateful she is for him encouraging her to be verbal and open about her desires.

Authors quoted in this section include: Dodie Bellamy, Allen Ginsberg, Judith Butler, Michel Fouccault, Naomi Ginsberg, Maya Angelou, Susan Fraiman, Alice Munro, and Lee Edelman.

Analysis

The author's references here to the devaluing of elder female bodies echoes perspectives and commentary by several authors, and indeed of elder women in general, that as they age and become less apparently sexual (and / or capable of procreation), they virtually disappear, losing what society has deemed to be their presence and value. Here it's interesting to note the term "crone" which, in popular perception, carries with it the implication of decrepit-ness, discontent, and solitude, but which, in the reclaimed language of feminist and humanist theory, is coming to mean an elder woman whose life is defined by wisdom, perspective, and honesty that may or may not exist in solitude.

The thematically central commentary on sexuality that concludes this section is grounded in what the author sees and contends as a fundamental, socio-cultural perspective on female sexuality – that as far as male perspectives are concerned (i.e. the patriarchy), women's enjoyment of sex is irrelevant. Her offering of gratitude to Harry can therefore be seen as an acknowledgement of his acknowledgement of her – although it's ironic to note that the author's sexual enjoyment of Harry began while he was still physically female.

Finally, for further consideration of the author's invitation to the reader to "ponder" the experience of Catherine Opie, see "Topic for Discussion 6."

Vocabulary

labia, incision, cajole, speculative, abject, putrefy, provocation, verbatim, flotation, moniker, matriarchal, cosmology, autumnal, substantive, coherent, reticence, epithet, tutelage, calibrate, autoerotic, capacious, incipient, rebus, degradation, ambivalence, annihilate, nuance

Part 6, pages 70 – 83

Summary

This section begins with a description of an art show called “Puppies and Babies,” in which a variety of paired subjects (male/female, queer/non-queer, human/animal, pregnant/non-pregnant) are photographed in a wide array of arrangements. The author suggests that the show proposes that “caretaking [is] detachable from – and attachable to – any gender, any sentient being” (72). This leads the author to a discussion of homonormativity: the “normalization” of homosexuality, or what she suggests is the absorption of heterosexual values or “normalness” into homosexual orientation and behavior. She then argues against using the principle of protecting the children (often evoked by those opposed to ensuring equal rights for non-heterosexuals and other varied gender identities) as a key element in social – political constructs (such as those that demonize homosexual behavior). The author argues that individual children do still need to be protected, perhaps from the very people (“the gratuitously wealthy and greedy”) who seem to be running things.

This then leads the author to a recollection, addressed to Harry (“you”) of their attempts to make a baby through artificial insemination, the increasing casualness of the increasingly expensive medical procedure, and a temporary effort to conceive with the help of a friend’s free sperm. Then, in a shift from direct address to Harry and into present tense, the author describes one more attempt at the more official insemination program. There is then a brief diversion into commentary on certain analysts who seem to proclaim as evil and destructive any form of reproduction other than that which involves male/female sexual intercourse within the bounds of a monogamous relationship, commentary that also, the author writes, condemns the transgendered as “barely human” (79).

A paragraph heading identifies the setting in time for this next section as “2011, the summer of our changing bodies. Me, four months pregnant, you six months on [testosterone]” (79). Narration, again addressing Harry as “you,” describes a trip the couple took to Florida in order for Harry to have the surgery that would complete the transition from female to male. The author describes the heat, the warmth, the crowds on the beach, and the intensity of her love as she took care of Harry post-surgery. Later, the author writes, they found a program chronicling the experience of a woman who had just undergone a double mastectomy as treatment for breast cancer, a woman who was going through the opposite emotions of Harry after having his breasts removed. “You felt unburdened, euphoric, reborn,” the author writes. “The woman on TV feared, wept, and grieved.” Then, in a paragraph that shifts into present tense, the author writes of having a dinner at the hotel, in which Harry was perceived as “a guy; I, as pregnant” (83). That, the author suggests, felt like they were simply becoming more human.

Authors quoted in this section include: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Catherine Opie, Susan Fraiman, Lee Edelman, Andre Breton, and Julia Kristeva.

Analysis

The concept of being heteronormative returns in this section, in which the author discusses whether, in its quest for equal rights (including those associated with marriage and employment), the equality movement is actually buying into philosophies and practices that are restrictive, rather than safe or freeing. This questioning is juxtaposed with the section that eventually makes a key point about those who experience life as transgendered, or gender-fluid, the implication being that those who identify as homosexual (or sexually fluid in orientation) are themselves seen as “barely human.” This, in turn, is juxtaposed with the author’s thoughts on the experience she shared with Harry as a result of their shared transitions – the author into pregnancy and motherhood, Harry into being male. In the overall context of the author’s advocacy, throughout the book, for individual perspective being the primary means of defining identity, the implication here seems to be an aspect of the book’s thematic interest in the creation of identity. This is the idea that no matter what their gender or orientation, once an individual lands on an aspect of their being that feels personally and intuitively true, they are on the path to becoming not only more themselves as individuals, but also more human.

Also worth noting in this section: the author’s juxtaposition of, and commentary on, the surgeries of Harry and the unnamed woman having a mastectomy. Without explicitly saying so, the author portrays both Harry and the woman as having the same experience: having their breasts removed. For Harry, the experience is a positive one on his journey towards realizing his true identity, but for the unnamed woman, the experience is a negative one, losing what she defines as her identity. A key point to note here is that both of these experiences are defined by a physical, outer loss that triggers an emotional, inner transformation.

Vocabulary

anarchic, titular, binary, myriad, malodorous, missive, eschew, raucous, prurient, illicit, subversion, nihilist, transgressive, penchant, apotheosis, polemic, succinct, rationalize, nefarious, excretion, bulbous, fervent, hyperbole, pontificate, repulsive, assimilation, mastectomy

Part 7, pages 83 - 95

Summary

This section begins its exploration of the effect of pregnancy and childbirth on the author's body with a discussion of how pregnancy affects the passing of feces (i.e. the fact that the uterus presses on the lower intestine, causing difficulty in sustaining successful bowel movements). This leads to commentary on anal eroticism – specifically, the author's contention (utilizing the writing of other authors as evidence) that female anal eroticism has never received much positive attention, when attention has been paid at all, in spite of the anus being one of the most enervated (i.e. connected to nerve endings) parts of the body. This discussion, in turn, leads to the author's discussion (while addressing Harry, again as "you") of how her sexual desire changed and in some ways weakened as a result of pregnancy while Harry's, in the aftermath of starting his testosterone treatments, increased. Her different feelings and responses to sex, the author writes, have continued even after the birth of her and Harry's son. She adds that she and Harry "go on, [their] bodies finding each other again and again, even as they – we – have also been right here, all along" (86).

The author then, in third person narration, discusses her initial disappointment at finding out her baby was a boy, a disappointment that soon turned to joy and a deeper awareness of the similarities between the bodies of the genders. She juxtaposes this insight with commentary from a white writer married to a black man and pregnant with a mixed-race child, who consistently experienced awkward reactions from even liberal friends. The author also juxtaposes these comments with a revelation from Harry (that "guys are pretty nice to each other in public") (88), and stories of how well she was treated by others while pregnant, the idea being (she believes) that that respect came from the belief that she was holding the future inside her. These contemplations she then juxtaposes with what she portrays as patronizing, patriarchal questions about her pregnancy while promoting a book, the perception being, she suggests, that a pregnant woman can't be anything BUT pregnant. She describes the challenge of becoming aware that even during pregnancy, the mother is limited in what she is able to do to ensure her baby's welfare, narration revealing that during her pregnancy, there were concerns about the baby's kidneys. The author writes that she and Harry decided that those concerns were not going to be addressed until after the baby was born. "Babies grow," she writes, "in a helix of hope and fear … it isn't cruel in there, but it's dark" (92).

Authors quoted in this section include: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Fanny Howe.

Analysis

The author's commentary on the transformation in her body, its effects, and the correlation of both to the effects of changes in Harry's body, functions on a couple of important thematic levels. They occur in relation to the book's thematic explorations of

the creation of identity (in that the bodily changes experienced by both people are formative in the shaping of their identity) and of the nature and variations of sexual identity. Meanwhile, the reference to her and Harry's repeated discoveries of their bodies has a metaphoric value similar to the evocation of the helix at the end of the section: the two opposites there, hope and fear, are similar to the two opposites found in the author's bodily and sexual experiences, an old way of being and knowing giving way to a new one. This, in turn, can be seen as a metaphoric evocation of the book's thematic exploration of the relationship between life and death, as well as a similarly metaphoric echo of the book's earlier reference to "becoming."

Other noteworthy points in this section include the reference to the mixed race couple which, juxtaposed with the author's writing about her response to learning the gender of her child, suggests that the point being made has to do with the nature, value, and quality of expectation – that is, what people think SHOULD be. Then: the author's interpretation of the respect shown her while pregnant encapsulates, or sums up, what she seems to think is the attitude of society in general to pregnancy: that it is, on some level, an expression of, or extension into, possibilities associated with the future. Finally in this section, there is the reference to the author's idea of the helix of emotion within which babies come into being.

Vocabulary

constipation, plausibility, pendulous, quiver, debonair, ratiocination, assertion, gestate, camaraderie, traipse, prestigious, patrician, helix, trepidation, triptych

Part 8, pages 95 - 111

Summary

As her narration of her pregnancy continues, the author refers to her deepening, and paradoxical, thoughts around abortion, and to her growing knowledge that even in utero, her baby is developing a self, an individual identity - an “Argo” (94). She argues that the development of a child’s individual identity, and a woman’s identity as a mother, should not come at a cost, nor be identified solely as a mother filling a void in herself, but that pregnancy and motherhood can and should be a joy in and of itself. This leads her into another contemplation of language – specifically, how her own language can, and often is (in her own view) an apology for an opinion, and uncertainty about that opinion. She writes of editing out the apologies in her work, saying that by doing so, she edits herself “into a boldness that is neither native nor foreign to me” (98).

The author then turns to a discussion of the pumping of breast milk, referring to a general lack of such images removed from clinical analysis or commentary. She also comments that as opposed to actual breast feeding, the pumping of breast milk is “an admission of distance, of maternal finitude … suffused with best intentions” (99). This idea is contrasted with the comment that in contemporary society, breast milk is infused with various environmental toxins. It’s all, the author says, a question of degree as to how toxic her breast milk is. This leads to commentary first on her obstinate insistence on continuing to work in a bar where cigarettes could still be smoked, and then on her similarly obstinate insistence on drinking alcohol, to the point of being an alcoholic.

The author then discusses issues related to body size and shape, starting with a reference to how a baby creates size and space as it grows, both in a woman’s outer (physical) body and in her inner (emotional, psychological, spiritual) life. These comments are juxtaposed with a self-awareness of limitation when she writes, “Writing is my only talent, and writing has always felt more clarifying than creative to me” (103). She confesses that “having a small body, a slender body” (105) has always been a key element of her own identity, referring to the fact that several of her mentor figures are large and to her mother’s contrasting obsession with being thin. The author then discusses her mother’s marital history: how her first husband (the author’s biological father, whom the author recognizes in her son) died shortly after the author’s mother left for another man; how her mother’s second husband triggered sexuality and sensuality in her, but eventually left after 20 years; and how she and her third husband seem to have made peace with her lack of positive self-image. “He doesn’t try to talk her out of her self-deprecation”, the author writes, “nor does he abet it. He simply loves her. I am learning from him” (108).

The author’s commentary on having a post-baby body concludes with references to special garments given to her by the hospital to help her shape the extra skin and weight left behind by pregnancy; to the two sides of celebrity pregnancy (the interest in both the pregnancy and how quickly the mother can get rid of the SIGNS of pregnancy

– i.e. get her body back); and how, for a while, she felt entirely comfortable exchanging sexual desire for fatigue.

Authors quoted in this section include: Kaja Silverman, Eileen Miles, Joan Didion, Gilles Deleuze / Claire Parnet, Monique Wittig, Adam Phillips / Barbara Taylor, Judith Butler, and James Schuyler.

Analysis

At the beginning of this section, the author juxtaposes her potentially controversial comments on abortion with references to her belief that a gestating baby is in the process of developing its identity, even while in its mother's womb. The reference here to the baby being an "Argo" is another of the book's title-related references to the Greek myth of the traveling, adventure-seeking sailors on the ship "The Argo." The reference here suggests that a gestating child is, even before it's born, on an adventure that will define its life. All in all, this section is one of the book's more significant explorations of its thematic consideration of the creation of identity. \

Other themes developed in this section include the book's consideration of the nature and value of words (i.e. in the author's further comments about words, and more obliquely, in her reference to how writing has defined, and continues to define, her identity), and the role of inheritance in the shaping of identity (i.e. in the author's glimpse of apparently genetically inherited similarity between her father and her son).

Other noteworthy points in this section include the author's reference to being an alcoholic (one of only two references in the book to this situation which, for the most part, goes undiscussed throughout the narrative); the implications of the author's comments on writing (which suggests that for her, the process is less about communication than it is about exploration); and the different aspects of a woman having a so-called "baby body" (including the reference to celebrity pregnancy). There is the implication, in these references, that in the author's perspective on society, the experience of having a baby is valued in terms of the new life, and the hope, the baby symbolizes, rather than the experience of the mother's carrying and giving birth to a child. She seems to be making the claim that once again, but in another way, the experience of the woman is being devalued. Finally, there is the author's very telling reference to what she sees as her mother's husband's feelings. The implication here, in this longing-infused idea, is that, in an ideal world, his attitude should be that of anyone in an intimate relationship.

Vocabulary

aperture, hieroglyph, nihilism, abject, adjunct, corollary, fervent, predilection, profusion, flaccid, impotent, expulsion, corpulent, ancestral, density, disparage, ersatz, sentinel, supplanted

Part 9, pages 111 - 134

Summary

The author describes her first encounter with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. In a doctoral class at university, an introductory game led by Sedgwick led the author to a new understanding about herself and her work. The author also refers to how an article by Sedgwick led, before it was even published, to her being viciously vilified and pursued by those who resented, according to the author, both the idea about which she was writing and her happiness and success in writing about it. This leads the author to consideration of a similar circumstance: the unhappy response of a particular reader to her writing about the murder of her mother's sister Jane. That reader, she writes, became a stalker from whom she had to be protected (this, she adds, was taking place during the period in which she was trying to get pregnant) first by security at the university campus where she worked, then by a hired security guard.

The author then diverts from this story into a brief description (addressed to Harry as "you") of how Harry, in the aftermath of 9/11, created homemade weapons and, early in their courtship, left one for the author, an offering that made "the brutal tender" (118). She also discusses her own practice, starting in childhood, of imagining the worst so that anything bad that happened could never be a surprise. The author writes that that practice, which she thinks she inherited from her worrying mother, led her, in the aftermath of Iggy's birth, to imagining horrible sufferings for him. She then returns to a reference to the stalker, a present-tense paragraph in which she also refers to teaching a poem that seems to have the same perspective on life and fear as her mother. This is followed by a Harry-addressing paragraph of the physically transformative way that life simply recycles itself. This then relates to an anecdote about performance artist Annie Sprinkle (whose art tends to focus on a breaking of boundaries around gender, bodily function, and sexuality), that suggests "there is nothing you can throw at me that I cannot metabolize, no thing impervious to my alchemy" (123). This then relates to the author's realization that she can integrate the stalker, and the experience of being stalked, into her work.

A series of consistently short paragraphs follows, in which the author moves back and forth between comments about the stalker, brief recollections of taking care of Iggy when he was ill, and of the security guard leaving because the money to pay him had run out. This last is juxtaposed with a reference to the cervix's job of making "an impenetrable wall protecting the fetus" (124), a wall that eventually gets broken down by the impetus towards birth. Narration shifts into present tense as the author describes the process of getting ready for Iggy's birth. At one point the short paragraphs are interrupted by a longer one, in past tense, describing Harry's mother's death by cancer – her wanting to die at home, and Harry's eventual joining her so that she wouldn't have to die alone. Back in present tense narration, the author describes her increasing desperation to get the baby out of her. Eventually she is taken to a hospital, where she is in labor for several more hours. After much time, she agrees to take drugs. After the

drugs kick in, she calms and focuses. Narration then shifts to italicized narration by Harry (in which his references to himself as “i” are un-capitalized) of his last hours with his mother, culminating in his telling her to fall asleep and in his falling asleep himself. The author describes the moment at which she is told that things are finally ready to happen. In another, longer paragraph, Harry narrates the final moments of his mother’s life. In another series of short paragraphs, the author narrates the first moments of Iggy’s life outside his mother’s uterus. Harry writes of staying with his mother for several hours after she died. The author writes of the experience of birth being one of “touching death” (134).

Authors quoted in this section include: Dan Savage, Beatriz Preciado, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick.

Analysis

This section of the book contains what is arguably its thematic and narrative climax: the entwined narratives of Iggy’s birth and Harry’s mother’s death. This is a clear and vivid manifestation of the book’s thematic exploration of the relationship between the two experiences, its power reverberating backwards through everything that has gone before and giving it deeper, and more layered, meaning. Meanwhile, this particular exploration of the life/death cycle is foreshadowed earlier in the section by the author’s reference to Harry’s perception of life recycling itself.

There is also, in this section, the presence of two highly significant individuals in the author’s group of “sappy crones,” although the work and attitude of Sedgwick and Sprinkle, as considered here, seems to have a lot more edge and anger than sappiness about it. A point to note about the reference to Sedgwick is that in the reference to how she was vilified in the aftermath of presenting some of her ideas, there is a clear echo of a pair of references, earlier in the book, to how other female thinkers were shamed. These are the reference in Part 3 to the apparent shaming of Jane Gallop; and the reference in Part 5 to Christina Crosby. This particular anti-shame motif can be seen as an expression of an authorial intention to advocate for the elimination of shame in relation to the work of women thinkers questioning, if not challenging, the patriarchal status quo.

Other points to note in this section include the references to the stalker (a situation in the author’s life that the book doesn’t resolve; the reference to the cervix as a wall (which can be seen as a metaphoric reference to many other sorts of “walls”; and the technical, stylistic variations in the writing during the climax. These include the short paragraphs describing Iggy’s birth, paragraphs that tend to be constructed of short sentences, all of which give a sense of urgency and intensity to this aspect of the story. Then there are the longer paragraphs describing the death of Harry’s mother, which give a sense of stretched, intensified, deepening time; and the lack of capitalization in the latter. There is the sense here that while the pronoun “i” is a necessary inclusion to define point of view, the lack of capitalization suggests that for Harry, his identity /

experience in the moment is of less ultimate value than the experience itself. “i” is unimportant: the experience is.

Vocabulary

postpartum, delirium, imminent, conjugal, deviant, amphibious, dexterous, capable, evasive, accretive, proliferative, vitriol, cumulative, depletion, canonical, cinematic, urethane, talisman, prophylactic, delusion, scabrous, efface, akimbo, catheter

Part 10, pages 134 - 143

Summary

The author describes the process by which she and Harry decided on a Native American name for their son: Igasho, meaning “he who wanders” (135), and how their concerns about two white people giving their white child an Indian name were allayed by a Native American nurse. There is then narration of Harry’s succession of names: how he was born with one, got another when he was adopted, gave himself a nickname in school, changed his name (to Harriet) when he was older, and finally (after his transition) settled on Harry. Narration then describes that Harry found his birth mother and learned that his biological father was violent and not someone his birth mother lived with or married. Harry also learned that his biological brother was an addict and died young. The author then comments that Harry had his “last drink at twenty-three. You already knew” (139). Continuing to address Harry, the author writes of how he felt the experience of being adopted as freedom, as though he “came from the whole world, utterly plural” (139).

The book concludes with the author’s contemplation of the kind of parent she wants to be, and the kind of parent she is: wanting to be sure of maintaining separate identities in her family, knowing she can be overly anxious and protective; knowing that a mother has to love well and let go; and believing that, because her son is white, she has to “become curious about what will happen if [she raises] him as just another human animal, no more or less worthy than any other. This is a deflation, but not a dismissal. It is also a new possibility” (141). There is a brief reference to a period when the very young Iggy suffered with a toxin in his system from which he eventually recovered, a resolution that, the author writes, led to a kind of happiness that may or may not be lasting but which Iggy created, a happiness that leads the author to feel finally able to speak to him in a way she couldn’t when she was pregnant with him.

That happiness, she adds, extends to his relationship with her stepson who, she says, loves Iggy and is loved by Iggy in return. Finally, the author includes a quote that suggests “that we, like all animals, are a project that issues in nothing” (143), responding by asking whether there is such a thing as nothingness, and adding that “we’re still here, who knows for how long, ablaze with our care, its ongoing song” (143).

Authors quoted in this section include: Eula Bliss, D.W. Winnicott, and Andrew Solomon.

Analysis

This section serves as something of an epilogue to the book, as its structural return to somewhat longer paragraphs and sentences brings the reader back down to a somewhat calmer experience than the shorter, more intense writing of the immediately previous section. Important points to note include the meaning of Iggy’s full name

(which can be seen as echoing the references, throughout the book, to “Argo” a term that has echoes of the idea of being a sailor, wanderer, or adventurer), and the author’s making a further connection between name and identity. This takes place through the brief reference to the process of Harry’s interaction with his name. The reference to “you already knew” can be seen as evoking the idea that, even before his brother’s death from addiction, Harry realized he was in danger of succumbing to addiction himself and stopping before that could happen.

The reference to Harry potentially being “utterly plural” is an expression of the author’s personal belief in the value of transcending imposed boundaries in shaping identity. This is also evoked in her contemplations of what it means for her to be a mother, and of what motherhood means in general, and in the hope she expresses that her son will come to understand the qualities of existence in the lives of those who are non-white. The implication here is that he will come to understand not only the qualities of those lives, but also the lives of those who are non-male, not of his sexual orientation, or anyone not living within the boundaries of that which heteronormative, patriarchal society considers “normal.” There is also the implied, metaphoric sense that in the same way as she mothered Iggy through the un-wellness of having a toxin in his system, the author will be able to mother him through the un-wellness of having the toxins of preconception, prejudice, and rigid, boundary-driven thinking forced upon him.

All this leads the author’s reflections on being and being nothing, a phrase that echoes a famous book on existential philosophy by Jean-Paul Sartre, “Being and Nothingness.”

Vocabulary

lactation, indicative, obviate, meticulous, interpellation, dyad, palpable

Important People

The Author (Maggie Nelson)

Maggie Nelson is a writer and teacher, and arguably a philosopher, as the writing in The Argonauts, with its use of language, ideas, and techniques of rhetoric (argument) has strong, engaging echoes of contemporary philosophical writing. It balances this type of critical thinking and analysis with a clever, careful interweaving of elements of autobiography: she is revealing her own thoughts on, and interpretations of, existing material while, at the same time, illustrating both with vivid descriptions of personal experiences that support and illuminate them. In that sense, the book is part memoir and part critical analysis, fulfilling what is arguably the purpose of the most widely engaging philosophical writing: making the theoretical seem personal and lived.

This is not to say that the writing, and the self-persona that the author creates as a result of that writing, are confessional, or that everything about the author and her life is laid bare. It cannot even be said that the central personal experiences of the book – the author's pregnancy, the birth of her child, and the gender-assignment surgery undergone by her partner – are discussed in their entirety. What the author does is reveal as much of herself and her life (and, by extension, those with whom she shares that life) as needs to be revealed to humanize her thoughts and ideas, to give them a face and identity as opposed to the limited weight and impact of the theoretical. The considered, in her writing, becomes experienced, and vice versa.

Ultimately, the book creates the sense that in both her writing and her life, the author is an activist for individual movement beyond that which is assumed, or proscribed. At the same time, she is also an activist for pushing boundaries of any sort. She is a feminist, but argues against some of feminism's arguments about gender and childbirth. She is a mother, but argues against many of society's ideas of what a mother's role should be, or is assumed to be. She is a spouse, but in both argument and action, explores and pushes the boundaries of what assumption of that role in a relationship entails. In short, like the mythic characters that give the book its title, the author is an adventurer and explorer: unlike those characters, however, the goal of her journey is something more ephemeral, something more unreachable than something (like the Golden Fleece sought by the Argonauts) that can be grasped in one's hands.

Harry

Harry is the author's legally married partner, a transgender male who, over the course of the narrative, is described as transitioning fully and physically from female to male. He is portrayed as being intellectual and passionate, creative and emotional, and supportive of the author but challenging, in a still supportive way, when her ideas disagree with his. There is an important stylistic element to the book that directly relates to Harry's presence in its narrative: there are frequent sections in which the author

writes in direct address to him, addressing him as "you." This reinforces the idea that in many ways, his presence in her life is one of the most defining influences on it.

Harry's Son

Harry's son, who is never named in the narrative, is written about in two ways - from the point of view of his being the author's stepson, and from the point of view of his being the author's son's brother (note the difference: he is not referred to as Iggy's stepbrother). He is portrayed as being imaginative and affectionate, someone for whom the author feels both responsibility and affection towards.

Iggy

Iggy is the name by which the author and Harry refer to their son. His full name is given as Igasho, a Native American name translating into "he who wanders." Iggy's influence, as portrayed in and by the narrative, comes into the author's life almost with the moment of his conception. His existence in her uterus, defining her as "pregnant" (a term that, in the author's writing, seems to be quite loaded with various preconceptions) and changing her body, shapes new and different perspectives on sexuality, gender, parenting, and abortion, among other issues. In many ways, Iggy is more of an influence, a catalyst, than he is an active character.

The Author's Mother

Several times throughout the narrative, as the author explores her own experiences of womanhood and parenthood, she refers to her mother's experiences of both. These references are one of the primary ways in which the author explores the idea of inheritance, both genetic and behavioral, in determining identity.

Harry's Mother

On one level, Harry's mother plays a less significant role in the narrative than the author's mother, simply because she appears in the narrative less frequently. On another level, however, the one section in which her presence plays a significant role is the book's climax, in which Harry's first-hand description of her death is counterpointed with the author's first-hand experience of the birth of her son. This narrative interaction between experiences of life and death defines one of the book's central themes, thereby placing the experiences of Harry's mother at the center of thematic development in a way that the experiences of the author's more peripherally developed mother are not.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick

Sedgwick is perhaps the most frequently quoted, and the most influential, of the many writers and thinkers the author quotes as references throughout her book. Sedgwick, the author suggests, was a key mentor for her as the author developed her perspectives on sexuality, gender, and on society's considerations of both.

D.W. Winnicott

In the same way as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick seems to be the author's primary source of analytical quotes on gender and sexuality, pediatrician and writer D.W. Winnicott seems to be the primary source of quotes on parenting. It's also worth noting that the author comments on Winnicott's use of language in a way that she doesn't on Sedgwick, suggesting that Winnicott's tendency towards clear, straightforward language plays as much of a role in demystifying the relationship about which he's writing as his ideas. This, in turn, supports the author's argument, offered in the book's opening paragraphs, in favor of the positive use and values of language.

Jane Gallop and Rosalind Krauss

Gallop and Krauss are two feminist scholars and writers whose confrontation at a conference inspires the author to consider the value of dichotomy in her own thinking - that is, the idea that two different ideas could exist not in conflict but in contrast. The confrontation also inspires the reader to think about and comment on the subject and process of shaming, with her perception of Krauss shaming Gallop for her ideas leading the author to become firm in her own belief that shaming, in whatever form or whatever reason, is inappropriate.

George Oppen and Mary Colby

The experiences in marriage of poet George Oppen and writer Mary Colby inspire the author's own contemplations of that relationship. The two felt connected and committed without the benefit of the actual ceremony, but got married for practical, safety-related reasons. Their experience, the author says, initially suggested to her that marriage was neither needed nor wanted, but then when she and Harry got married for reasons of legality and protest, she discovered that there was an emotional connection and resonance awakened in them as well. In other words, her contemplation of the experiences of people whom she respects leads the author not to blind acceptance of their values, but to deeper contemplation of her own.

Objects/Places

Gender

The fluid nature of gender, its role in defining identity, and how society views gender is one of the book's central thematic and narrative considerations. Development of this idea plays out most notably in relation to the situation and experience of the author's transgender partner, but it also plays out in terms of the author's varying, transforming experiences of being a woman.

The Argo

In Greek Mythology, the Argo was a sailing ship that, according to legend, was co-designed by the goddess Athena and protected by the goddess Hera. The ship was sent on a mission to retrieve the powerful Golden Fleece, which magically conferred the power to rule on whoever found it. Members of the Argo's crew were called The Argonauts, suggesting that the book's title, and the characters, refer to a similar sort of mission or voyage - in this case, their goal being the Golden Fleece of identity.

Language and Words

In the book's opening paragraphs, the author refers to a discussion between herself and her partner (who at that point is not gender-identified) about the value of words. The author argues from a position of belief that words are necessary and valuable openings into truth. Her position is supported by the way she uses the words of others (including her partner) to come to an awareness of her own truth, and also by the events portrayed in the book's conclusion, in which she shows herself, after considerable process of thought and analysis, to find the right words to say to her new son.

America

The United States of America, with its entwined, paradoxical histories of both advocating freedom and repression of those perceived as "different," is the setting for the book's action and narratives. The so-called "American Dream" of individual rights and opportunities for all is the implied, ironic subtext for the book's considerations of the treatment of the non-male, the non-white, the non-traditionally sexual, the gender fluid, and other groups on the "margins" of what is held to be "normal."

California

The state of California, with its reputation of liberal-ness in politics and thinking, is a somewhat ironic component of the book's setting. The vote of the citizens of California

in support of Proposition 8 was a trigger for some of the author's contemplations and analysis on gender, sexual orientation, the perceptions of both, and the need for individuals to be strong and clear about their gender and orientation choices.

Hollywood

This famed community on the west coast of America is the city in which the author, her partner Harry, their son Iggy, and Harry's son make their home. The community is portrayed as being generally welcoming and non-judgmental, the author's description of the wide open view from their home contrasting metaphorically with the more narrow moral view of the people in the state in which Hollywood exists.

New York City

This famed community on the east coast of America is the city in which the author began her academic and professional career. Encounters there with important feminist thinkers and metaphors shaped her life, perceptions, and writing significantly. It was, arguably, her intellectual home.

Fort Lauderdale

This popular tourist community in Florida is the setting for key moments in the author's story, particularly the early stages of her pregnancy and the final (surgical) stages of Harry's transition from female to male. These events, and other experiences the couple had while in Fort Lauderdale, provide the motivation and context for some of the author's most telling, and most compelling, contemplations on gender, the body, and sexuality.

Proposition 8

Proposition 8 was a proposal to amend the constitution of the state of California to legally recognize only marriages between a man and a woman. The proposal came into existence after same-sex marriage was temporarily legalized in 2004. The author places the beginning of the book, and arguably the beginning of her serious contemplations of gender and sexuality, at the time of the Proposition 8 vote.

Names

Names are a key point of consideration throughout the book, both proper names (i.e. the names by which people call themselves, or are addressed) and common names - "man," "woman," "husband," "wife," "child," and so on. The meaning of these names, the author's analysis contends, both defines and is defined by identity, by perceptions of

identity, and by preconceptions of identity. In short, the book suggests that the relationship between a "name" and a "truth" is complicated and constantly changing.

Themes

The Creation of Identity

Virtually everything the author writes about relates, in one way or another, relates to issues relating to the question of how identity is created. She explores the shaping of Harry's physical identity (i.e. in her discussions of his surgery and hormone treatments) in much the same way as she explores the shaping of the identity of her unborn child. She does this in her discussions of everything from the choice of his name to the choice of how much to hold him to her realization of how much he physically resembles his maternal grandfather.

Meanwhile, she explores the shaping of her own intellectual and philosophical identity (i.e. in her discussions of her relationships with female mentors) in much the same way as she explores the shaping of her identity as a mother. This she does primarily in discussion of ways in which she interacts with, and responds to, instructions in books by male authors like D.W. Winnicott. Throughout all of this, she explores and comments on how identity is shaped and defined by societal and cultural pressures, both historic and contemporary. All of these external influences, she ultimately argues, are given more weight than what she also suggests should be given the most weight: the individual's inner, often inarticulate, sense of inner identity.

This, in turn, is clearly explored in connection to the concept and practice of choice – or, more specifically, the author's advocacy for the individual's right and responsibility to make his or her own choices, based on the aforementioned sense of internal identity. She also advocates for the individual's right to make such identity defining choices, whether it be the choice to physically transform into the gender an individual identifies with; the choice to identify as gay, lesbian, queer, or free from any sexual identity at all; or the choice to identify with one school of thought about feminism, gender, or cultural roles. All that said, however, there are a number of clear and explicit references to ways in which identity is created or shaped that have nothing to do with choice.

The Role of Inheritance in Shaping Identity

The author's clear, direct emphasis on the importance of inner experience in defining identity-shaping choice sits somewhat paradoxically alongside her more implied emphasis on the importance of inherited influences on identity. On one level, this emphasis manifests in her descriptions of her relationship with her mother, and on how the author is clearly able to see aspects of her mother in her own life. She doesn't necessarily get into questions of genetics or heredity, but there is the clear implication in the author's comments about her mother that the author is very aware that external circumstances of an individual's past, such as environment, context, and circumstance, affect the inner and outer life of that individual's present. Choice, in spite of the author's

clear contentions of its primacy, is not the only element involved in shaping identity: there is also the inheritance of what has gone before.

On another level, the relationship between inheritance (that is: the passing on of information and/or characteristics from the past to the present) and identity manifests in a more subtle manner through the author's discussions of the many mentors in her life and in the inclusion of so many quotes and footnotes, indicating the influence of those same mentors and of others. Both these aspects of the narrative clearly communicate how the author's thoughts and experiences have been shaped by what others have said, done, and taught her - the ideas, insights, and values she has inherited. In turn, she has also shaped her own experiences as a result of her choices, and she has begun to pass on those experiences and thoughts to her son. Even in the early days of his life, she was, and is, giving him HIS inheritance, shaping him with it, parenting him in a way influenced by her inheritances from such diverse influences as her mother, pediatrician D.W. Winnicott, and the many thinkers around feminism and gender issues she has encountered.

Explorations of Sexuality and Gender

According to the author, among the most significant choices an individual can make around issues of identity are those connected to sexual expression and activity, gender (specifically gender roles), and gender identity. The narrative and themes of the book are anchored by considerations of all three – specifically, the author's considerations of own sexuality, of issues around the way in which she and others (of any gender) view the female gender, and of the experiences of those who identify as gender fluid, or gender-transitional.

The first level of the book's exploration of sexuality and gender, explorations of sexual expression and activity, is explored to a less sizeable - but no less significant - degree than the other two. Said explorations take place primarily through the author's discussion of her own experiences of being what she herself describes as kinky.

The latter two explorations of sexuality and gender are the more significant, both being given dominating amounts of page time and narrative attention. The second, issues related to the view and valuing of aspects of being female, emerges primarily in response to the author's experiences of being pregnant and of giving birth. The author's narrations of her experience are juxtaposed with descriptions of how traditionally pregnant women have been viewed by and in the culture at large, in society's myths and stories about itself, and in feminist theory.

The last, considerations of the experience of being gender-fluid, emerges primarily in response to the situation of the author's partner, artist Harry Dodge. Harry, in the course of the narrative, undergoes surgery to complete the physical transition from female to male. There are references to how Harry's perception of society is affected by his transition, as well as straightforward narrations of how society's perceptions manifest.

On all three levels, the author presents issues of sexuality and gender as being fundamental to identity. In paying such close and detailed attention to these issues, she suggests decisions around, and comfort with, these issues are key components to defining the self and living comfortably with individuals who have made the effort to understand, accept, and live with their own sexual, gendered selves.

The Nature and Value of Words

For a book that proclaims, in its early sections, that words are ultimately and inevitably inaccurate, The Argonauts contains a great many words that arguably come close to expressing important personal, cultural, and societal truths.

As the book begins, the author describes a conversation with her partner in which they take opposing sides on the question of what value words have. How accurate is it possible for them to be? How much truth can they actually communicate? The author argues from a position that words are at least a beginning, a way into truth that, if deployed correctly, leaves room for the reader, or the listener, to apply what is said (or implied) to come to his or her own understanding of meaning. Her partner in conversation (who is not identified by name in this initial conversation, but who is eventually revealed to be Harry, the author's partner in life) argues that words, by their very nature, are never going to be anything more than inaccurate and limited. Interestingly, the author then proves Harry's point by providing examples of how difficult it is for language, written or verbal, to encompass the transitional variations in Harry's gender identity.

Questions of the meaning and implications of words – or, more specifically, questions of how people are expected, or have become expected, to react to words and their implications - thread their way throughout the book. Words and ideas, the author seems to be suggesting, have value as triggers and manifestations of thought and analysis. As manifestations of truth, she further contends, words tend to impose limitations and become boundaries or rules. These, the author argues through example and demonstration, can ultimately be changed or pushed back by action, by making choices that go beyond the expectations or preconceptions that are inherent in the existence of words – even such words as male, female, baby, mother, love, or death.

The Relationship between Life and Death

The relationship between life and death that's drawn by the author at the book's climax can be seen as infusing virtually all the various considerations that have gone before in the book. The point is not made to suggest that everything discussed in the book is a matter of physical life or physical death, as are the narratively entwined events at the climax (i.e. the birth of the author's son and the death of the author's partner's mother). Instead, the life – death relationship explored in the earlier parts of the book is more metaphorical, manifesting primarily as the death of old ideas, perspectives, and values entwining with the birth of new ones.

This metaphorical interaction of life and death plays out on two levels, which themselves interact. The first level is a personal one, as the author describes her encounters with old ideas about sexuality and gender that, as a result of her own contemplations, research, and experiences, change and evolve. These encounters are the result of two very personal, intimately and immediately felt sets of circumstances: her pregnancy, and her intimate relationship with a person transitioning from being female identified into being male identified. As a new physical life begins within her, new emotional lives (with the child and with her partner) also begin: simultaneously, her old relationship with her body and with that of her partner dies.

This personal level of experience, meanwhile, is both a manifestation of, and a trigger for, life and death interactions on a cultural and social level. There is the sense throughout the book that the author's personal evolution on gender and sexuality-related subjects is possible, at least in part, as a result of society's changing attitudes – the death, in many ways, of old prejudices and laws based on those prejudices. A new and different life for non-traditional sexualities and gender-identifications is, for the author, being born, which simultaneously enables her own shifts and is reinforced by them. The social cycle of life and death, the book suggests, is continual and inevitable, in the same way as the physical cycle of life and death, portrayed in the book's climax.

Styles

Structure

The primary point to note about the book's structure is that it doesn't really have one. There is nothing as formal as a chapter, nothing as shape-making as a clear through-line of thought, nothing as focused as a central character's journey of transformation. The book is, in many ways, a stream of consciousness conglomerate of ideas, experiences, and illuminations in the form of quotes from other authors. That is: thought triggers thought, experience triggers thought, thought triggers illumination, illumination triggers memory, memory triggers thought, all interacting in a style that lacks an obvious considered formal trajectory but which does, more often than not, suggest connections that are less random than they might initially appear.

That said, there is arguably a climax of sorts: the narration, late in the book, of the birth of the author's child, counterpointed and juxtaposed with comments from the author's life partner describing his experience of his mother's death. Aside from the fact that this sequence of intercut scenes is the most literal evocation in the book of one of its major themes (The Relationship between Life and Death), this section, with its shortened paragraphs and sentences, also contains its most vividly and intensely emotional writing. Without a sense of a structure being overtly laid down up, by the time the narrative arrives at this sequence, there is the clear sense that everything that has been written, discussed, referred to, or examined up to this point has LED to this point. Here it's particularly significant to note, in this context, that the child-birth / mother-death section of the book is virtually free from footnoted quotations, where the rest of the book had been thick with them. To look at it another way: all the ideas, issues, and themes that have, to this point, been presented as primarily thought through culminate in a structurally climactic experience (it is, after all, the second last major narrative "moment" in the book) in which, as the author suggests, there is no room for thought. There is only room for pain, and for love, and for hope.

Perspective

At the core of the book's kaleidoscopic, multi-faceted perspective on issues related to gender and sexuality is one central idea: the author's implied perspective that everything that society believes, or expects to be believed, about those issues ought to be questioned, challenged, and ultimately re-considered. In her writing, in her thinking, and in her life, she actively confronts perceptions and beliefs about what women should be; what women's experiences of pregnancy, childhood, and sexuality should be; and what the experiences of any person in any relationship should be. In other words, the author's perspective is one that advocates, and indeed lives, according to the principle that an individual's right to freedom and to choose is close to absolute, if not entirely absolute.

What's interesting to note here is that she doesn't necessarily advocate the breaking of boundaries and the destruction of preconceptions for their own sakes. She is not above or beyond agreeing with existing, or even long-term, philosophies or values if they agree with her own experience. A key example of this is her perspective on abortion which, as she writes about it, evolved as a result of actually having an experience of conception and of having a child grow inside her body. She allows herself to discover, to be taken by surprise – here again, she is an explorer and an adventurer, using the ship of her own life to transport her to new, unexplored, inner lands where there are thoughts, feelings, and encounters that can, could, and will shape her, her family, and her other relationships. The perspective is one of questioning and challenging, but without presuppositions of how questions will be answered, and how challenges will be met. The only answers she offers are those associated with her own experiences, and those that urge the reader to undertake, to whatever level and in whatever way, similar explorations.

Tone

The book's overall tone has similar qualities to its structure. That is to say that tone varies according to what is being discussed, the author's experience of and perspective on what is being discussed, and the way in which she wants the reader to react to what is being discussed. For example, discussions of what happens to a woman's body during pregnancy and childbirth range from anatomically-defined comments about the placement of the uterus next to the intestine to descriptions of how, in the aftermath of giving birth, the author also had a huge bowel movement. Thus, the analysis of writers whose work is quoted by the author is referenced with a feeling of respectful commentary, while the comments of other, perhaps less educated, individuals is presented as being entirely unreliable. The writing about ideas, like the ideas themselves, has tonal qualities that shift and mutate according to the connections that the author is trying to make, and the effect that the author sees those connections as potentially having.

That said, there is one particular, frequently employed shift in tone that stands on its own. These are the frequent insertions of writing addressed to the author's partner, Harry Dodge. This writing directly refers to Harry as "you" as it discusses shared experiences, moments of conflict, and common beliefs and values. There is a sense of intimacy here, of vulnerability, that much of the rest of the book lacks. There seems to be a clear, if not explicitly confirmed, reason for this: at one point, the author says, she gave Harry a copy of the manuscript to read, and he expressed his unhappiness with how he was portrayed and how his experiences and perspectives were included. Reading this, the reader can't help but wonder whether, or perhaps conclude that, the sections addressed to Harry were included in later drafts in order for the author to address his concerns. In any case, and whatever the reason, these sections add a layer of humanity and, as mentioned, vulnerability to a text that has, as its primary tonal qualities, a sense of the academic lecture and a concurrent sense of assertively frank confession.

Quotes

In this way you can have your empty church with a dirt floor swept clean of dirt and your spectacular stained glass gleaming by the cathedral rafters, both. Because nothing you say can fuck up the space for God.
-- The Author (Part 1)

Importance: With this quote, the author uses different images relating to the spiritual associations of church to illustrate her point that no matter what kinds of words get used to develop any kinds of ideas, there is always room for a spiritual, personal, inner truth to emerge.

…Barthes describes how the subject who utters the phrase ‘I love you’ is like ‘the Argonaut renewing his ship during its voyage without changing its name.’ Just as the Argo’s parts may be replaced over time but the boat is still called the Argo, whenever the lover utters the phrase ‘I love you,’, its meaning must be renewed by each use, as ‘the very task of love and of language is to give to one and the same phrase inflections which will be forever new.
-- The Author, quoting Roland Barthes (Part 1)

Importance: Here the author analyses the idea, put forward by linguist and philosopher Roland Barthes, that the use of the words "I love you" is the equivalent of a sometimes wandering, sometimes purposeful, journey of truth such as that undertaken by the sailors on The Argo. The image here, and the idea of a journey, refers to several instances described by the author which she, in turn, suggests are sorts of journeys as well.

…I’ve also always thought it was a little romantic – the romance of letting an individual experience of desire take precedence over a categorical one.
-- The Author (Part 1)

Importance: With this quote, the author ties the ideas of freedom, of the search for individual identity, and the reaching for individual truth to the idea of romance - specifically, the idea that romance, as a concept, represents the search for, and connection with, an ideal beloved.

But where could this soldier have come from? How did he get so far from home? Is he badly wounded? Will he be kind or fierce when he awakens? Will he know I am good, or will he mistake me for my evil twin? What can I say that will bring him back to life?
-- The Author (Part 1)

Importance: This quote, from the game played by the author with her stepson, can be seen as, on another level, representing several situations referred to more literally in the book. These include the process of building a relationship, any relationship, in which the experience of wondering about the soldier here is parallel to the experience of wondering about anyone - beloved, parent, child, colleague - with whom someone is

becoming newly involved. There is also the sense that this idea, of questioning a newly encountered self, also applies to the experiences of the author (as she encounters herself anew through an experience of pregnancy and childbirth) and the author's partner (who encounters a new self through an experience of transitioning from one gender to another).

When you are a stepparent, no matter how wonderful you are, no matter how much love you have to give, no matter how mature or wise or successful or smart or responsible you are, you are structurally vulnerable to being hated or resented, and there is precious little you can do about it, save endure, and commit to planting seeds of sanity and good spirit in the face of whatever shitstorms may come your way."
-- The Author (Part 2)

Importance: Here, the author sums up what she suggests is a fundamental truth about being a stepparent, a truth that, it seems, she became aware of as a result of her own experience of becoming one herself.

[Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick] wanted [queer] to be a perpetual excitement, a kind of placeholder – a nominative, like "Argo," willing to designate molten or shifting parts, a means of asserting while also giving the slip. That is what reclaimed terms do – they retain, they insist on retaining, a sense of the fugitive."
-- The Author (Part 2)

Importance: This quote is notable for a number of reasons. It is one of several quotes in the book from a woman, and teacher, who became one of the most significant, mentoring influences in the author's life and career. It also reiterates and develops the metaphoric motif of The Argo, which represents the idea of life, and specific experiences within life, as being a journey.

I ignore the books that sternly advise against rocking or nursing your baby to sleep, so that she learns to go to sleep by herself; I am blessed with the time and the desire to hold Iggy until he slips off, and so I do … I know from raising my stepson that this ritual won't last forever – Iggy's babyhood is already speeding away. By the time this book is published, it will be gone."
-- The Author (Part 3)

Importance: This quote is one example of how the author, throughout the book and apparently in her life, takes information from other sources, considers it, and then both makes up her own mind and takes action based on what her experience and intuition suggest. Sometimes that agrees with what the books say, sometimes it doesn't. In this case, it doesn't.

And now, after living beside you all these years, and watching your wheel of a mind bring forth an art of pure wildness – as I labor grimly on these sentences, wondering all the while if prose is but the gravestone marking the forsaking of wildness (fidelity to sense-making, to assertion, to argument, however loose) – I'm no longer sure which of us is more at home in the world, which of us is more free."

-- The Author (Part 4 paragraph 52)

Importance: This quote is one of several sections in the book that directly address the author's partner, Harry. This particular quote continues a discussion that the author writes about in the book's first section - that is, a discussion between the author and Harry over the relative value of words. Here, even as she's questioning the value of the words she's using to try to make sense of the ideas she's expressing, she still manages to reveal an important aspect of her personal experience, one that relates to several of the book's themes. This is the question of what it means to be at home or safe in the world, or one's own life and identity.

… you asked me to say aloud what I wanted you to do to me. My whole body struggled to summon any utterable phrase … [I] felt myself to be standing before an enormous mountain, a lifetime of unwillingness to claim what I wanted, to ask for it. Now here you were, your face close to mine, waiting. The words I eventually found may have been Argo, but now I know: there's no substitute for saying them with one's own mouth."
-- The Author (Part 5)

Importance: The content of this quote refers specifically to the author's experience of being asked, by her partner, to express her sexual needs and desires. In its general principles, however, the quote can be seen as developing the book's thematic interest in questions of gender and gender relations, in that the experience of the female author is that of women in many situations - that is, of being uncomfortable with the unusual experience of being offered the freedom to express themselves.

That's what we both hate about fiction, or at least crappy fiction – it purports to provide occasions for thinking through complex issues, but really it has predetermined the positions, stuffed a narrative full of false choices, and hooked you on them, rendering you less able to see out, to GET out."
-- The Author (Part 6)

Importance: In this quote, the author applies the principles of the book's fundamental argument for freedom towards fiction. This is the idea that in much of such writing, she says, the apparent intention is to allow the reader freedom of thought and interpretation, or to trigger that freedom, but the actual result is the dictation, or at the least the suggestion, of what that thought is intended to be.

On the surface, it may have seemed as though your body was becoming more and more 'male,' mine, more and more 'female.' But that's not how it felt on the inside. On the inside, we were two human animals undergoing transformations beside each other, bearing each other loose witness. In other words, we were aging."
-- The Author (Part 6)

Importance: In this quote (which contains the word and concept of "becoming," a key word to describe identity and relationship throughout the book), the author suggests that the process of gender re-consideration that she and Harry are experiencing is not

unique to them, but is, in fact, an aspect or a facet, or a variation, of the greater transformation that every human being goes through over the course of a life.

As my body made the male body, I felt the difference between male and female body melt even further away. I was making a body with a difference, but a girl body would have been a different body too. The principal difference was that the body I made would eventually slide out of me and be its own body. Radical intimacy, radical difference."
-- The Author (Part 7)

Importance: As part of her consideration of the nature and meaning of the relationship of her female body to that of the male child growing in her uterus, the author comes to terms with what seems to be one of the fundamental principles of this book and its analysis. This is the idea that no matter how emotionally or physically close individuals are, they are still that - individuals, with their own identity.

Never in my life have I felt more pro-choice than when I was pregnant. And never in my life have I understood more thoroughly, and been more excited about, a life that begins at conception … We're not idiots; we understand the stakes. Sometimes we choose death."
-- The Author (Part 7)

Importance: In this quote, the author sums up her position on pregnancy and childbirth, one that she herself suggests is potentially controversial because it runs counter to the beliefs of both pro-abortion activists (one of which she has been for much of her adult life) and anti-abortion activists.

I know now that a studied evasiveness has its own limitations, its own ways of inhibiting certain forms of happiness and pleasure. The pleasure of abiding … of insistence, of persistence … of obligation, the pleasure of dependency. The pleasures of ordinary devotion. The pleasure of recognizing that one may have to undergo the same realizations, write the same notes in the margin, return to the same themes in one's work, relearn the same emotional truths, write the same book over and over again – not because one is stupid or obstinate or incapable of change, but because such revisitations constitute a life."
-- The Author (Part 8)

Importance: The term "studied evasiveness" basically translates into the concept of resistance, or perhaps even of having a closed mind. The idea of the quote, in context, is that as a result of committing, even halfheartedly, to something that was initially rejected, the author made an important and useful discovery about herself. This idea is, ultimately, a core idea of the whole book - that as part of the process of "becoming," someone has to be open to at least considering possibilities for positive growth and positive meaning to, for, and in the experience.

she was in the doorway of all worlds and i was in the doorway too. i forced myself not to disturb her, she seemed all at once to know where she was going and how to get there. her map. her job. the goal at hand. i cupped her warm hand in mine and let her go. i told

her one more time, you are surrounded in love, you are surrounded in light, don’t be afraid …i never wanted it to end … i have never wanted infinity to open up under an instant like i wanted that then …
-- Harry (Part 8)

Importance: The first point to note about this quote is that the use of lower case "i" is deliberate, and the choice of the quote's author. There is a sense here that in doing so, Harry is downplaying the presence of his identity and his experience in order to emphasize that of his mother. There is also the sense that this quote, like the other interjections from Harry in this section, is a key element in the book's thematic consideration of the relationship between life and death. The quote comes from a section in which a literal death is juxtaposed with a giving birth: the metaphoric implications of this juxtaposition carry on throughout the book.

I want you to know, you were thought of as possible – never as certain, but always as possible – not in any single moment, but over many months, even years, of trying, of waiting, of calling – when, in a love sometimes sure of itself, sometimes shaken by bewilderment and change, but always committed to the charge of ever-deepening understanding – two human animals, one of whom is blessedly neither male nor female, the other of whom is female (more or less), deeply, doggedly, wildly wanted you to be.”
-- The Author (Part 9)

Importance: In the book's concluding paragraphs, the author writes this statement in direct address to her son Iggy. There is a sense, given the intensity of what the author is saying and its placement close to the book's conclusion, that on some level, the author has been building to both what is being said and the ability and insight to say it over the course of the narrative. To use the author's own metaphor relating to the journey of the Argo: there is the sense that as she arrives at this point, she has completed her personal Argo-like journey and arrived at her destination - an embracing of her motherhood. On another level, the journey and arrival idea can also be seen as representing, or evoking, other journeys undertaken in relation to other persons' experiences of becoming. Imagine, in this context, the author addressing these comments to Harry in the aftermath of his gender transition. The same ideas and feelings apply to him as well as to Iggy.

Topics for Discussion

Part 1 - Paradoxes of Feeling

Discuss the implications of the juxtaposition between the author being referred to as “hard to get” and the author’s proclamation of love to her partner. In what ways is this juxtaposition paradoxical, or contradictory? What does it say about the author? About her identity? What does her inclusion of these two anecdotes, in such close proximity to one another, suggest about her way of looking at herself and her life?

Part 1 – Proposition 8

Research and discuss the history of Proposition 8 in California: the incidents that led to it being included on the ballot, the campaign leading up to the vote, and the votes outcome. What were the differing (opposing) values at play? What were the effects on voters before and after? How would you have voted?

Part 2 – The Patriarchy

Consider and discuss the concept of patriarchy as defined in this analysis, and referred to in the book. In what ways do you see contemporary culture and governance as defined by this system of thought? In what ways do you see patriarchal attitudes being challenged and changed?

Part 3 – Gender Issues

What issues related to gender or gender identity have you encountered, experienced, or become aware of? What are your perceptions and values when it comes to how the different genders are viewed and treated? What about those whose personal gender identity is fluid or changeable, as Harry’s is? How do you respond to situations like his?

Part 4 – Reactions to Gender Transition

In relation to the incident of the mother who grieved the loss of her child’s gender of birth, the author raises the question of whether such grief is valid. Some would argue that such a transition should be a cause for happiness: a transgendered individual’s struggle to claim identity is finally won. Others would argue that on some level, grieving the loss of an original gender identity is a kind of death. What side of this discussion do you come down upon? How do you think you might react if someone you loved proclaimed, and acted upon, a desire to change gender?

Part 5 - Pondering

The author directly calls upon the reader to ponder the experiences and perspectives of Catherine Opie without saying specifically what she is asking to BE pondered. What do you think the author is actually asking you to ponder? What are your thoughts on the situation the author describes?

Part 6 – The Relationship between Outer and Inner Transformation

The parallel surgical experiences of Harry and the unnamed woman are both defined by a physical, outer loss that triggers an emotional, inner transformation. What are your experiences of such a transformation? What changes to an aspect of your outer, physical existence have triggered significant changes in your inner, emotional, spiritual, or psychological life?

Part 7 – The Helix

The author describes the process of a baby's growth as existing on a helix of hope and fear. A helix is, in scientific terms, a line or coil wound around an invisible, but mathematically equidistant, central core. With that in mind, what is the author's point in describing the relationship of hope and fear, in terms of a baby's gestation and growth, as a helix?

Part 8 – Abortion

The experience of being pregnant led the author into holding what seems, at first glance, to be contradictory views on abortion. What is your perspective on her holding of these views? Do you see it as possible for someone to hold both? Why or why not? Are the two views mutually exclusive? Why or why not?

Part 8– Breast Milk

What is the irony associated with the author's reference to the toxins in breast milk?

Part 9 – The Wall between a Child and Life

The author describes a woman's cervix as a wall protecting the fetus, one that is eventually broken through so that the child can live. This can be seen as a metaphoric, or symbolic, reference to several other sorts of "walls" that keep not just babies, but any individual from being fully alive. What sorts of metaphoric walls, or barriers, discussed in the book might this image refer to?

Part 10 – Being, and Being Nothing

At the conclusion of the book's final section, the author's reflections on being and being nothing suggest a personal tension around her contrasting, conflicting ideas of the nature of life. Discuss your reaction to the claims made here: is life ultimately an experience leading towards nothing, or an experience of leading into being part of an existence that continues even after we're dead and no longer physically aware of it?