For the Sake of Strangers Study Guide

For the Sake of Strangers by Dorianne Laux

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Dorianne Laux's □For the Sake of Strangers□ first appeared in her second poetry collection, *What We Carry* (1994). It was included in *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime* (2004), a collection of thought-provoking poems compiled by Roger Housden. The poem is about the experience of continuing through daily life despite feeling immense grief. By using the word □we,□ Laux demonstrates that she is writing about a universal experience shared by many of her readers. Much of Laux's poetry strives to reflect shared universal experiences. She is often praised for the way she manages to incorporate detail into poems that explore such shared experiences. Although □For the Sake of Strangers□ is about an individual who is struggling with emotional pain, Laux creates a picture of hope as she describes strangers, unaware of the speaker's pain, showing kindness. The poem depicts a remedy to loneliness and hopelessness. The pain felt by the poem's speaker is a common problem, but the solution is somewhat unexpected.

□For the Sake of Strangers□ is written in free verse, which gives it a modern appeal and informal tone. Laux uses few literary devices, choosing a straightforward approach to her expression instead. Still, a careful reading of the poem reveals a sophisticated use of subtlety that adds layers of meaning and insight. By describing a series of strangers and their treatment of the grieved person, Laux creates an uplifting picture of the power of the kindness of strangers. She draws understated connections between the people in the poem, pointing to the universality of human experience. The people are strangers to the speaker in the poem, but they are not strangers to the speaker's pain. They have compassion for her because they, too, have felt grief.

Author Biography

Nationality 1: American

Birthdate: 1952

Born on January 10, 1952, in Augusta, Maine, Dorianne Laux is the daughter of Alton Percy Green, an Irish paper mill worker, and Frances (Comeau) Green, a nurse. Frances left her husband and sons, taking her daughter to California. She remarried, and the child took her stepfather's surname, Laux. In her twenties, Laux worked at an assortment of jobs, including gas station manager, maid, and donut maker. As a single mother to a daughter named Tristem, Laux struggled to continue her education but managed to take only occasional classes and writing workshops at a local junior college. She moved to Berkeley, California, in 1983. As she started to take her writing more seriously, she sought scholarships and grants that made it possible for her to return to school when her daughter was nine years old. Laux graduated with honors from Mills College in 1988. She married Ron Salisbury in 1991, but the marriage ended three years later. In 1997, she married the poet Joseph Millar.

Laux's career has been spent writing and teaching. Her poetry was first published in *Three West Coast Women* (1983), which featured her work and the poetry of Laurie Duesing and Kim Addonizio. Subsequent collections featured only Laux's poetry; *Awake* was published in 1990, *What We Carry* (in which □For the Sake of Strangers□ first appeared) was issued in 1994, *Smoke* was put out in 2000, and *Facts about the Moon* was released in 2005. Laux also collaborated with Addonizio to write *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (1997). Additionally, Laux's poetry is included in numerous anthologies and has been published in such publications as *Ploughshares*, *American Poetry Review*, and *Kenyon Review*. To date, her work has been translated into French, Italian, Korean, Romanian, and Brazilian Portuguese.

As a teacher and professor, Laux has been on the staffs of the California College of Arts and Crafts, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Oregon, where, in 2005, she was an associate professor in the Creative Writing Program. In addition to being a guest lecturer at various colleges, including Antioch University and California State University, Laux has been the writer in residence or visiting writer at the University of Arkansas, University of Memphis, University of Idaho, and Hamline University.

Laux's poetry has earned her critical recognition. She won a Pushcart Prize in 1986, her first poetry collection was nominated for a San Francisco Bay Area Book Critics Award, and *What We Carry* was a National Book Critics Circle Award finalist for poetry in 1995. She has also been the recipient of fellowships from such organizations as the MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. In 2001, the poet laureate Stanley Kunitz invited Laux to read at the Library of Congress.

Plot Summary

□For the Sake of Strangers□ describes the daily life of a person trying to carry on despite the heavy weight of grief. Throughout the poem, Laux uses the pronoun □we□ to show that the experience she is describing is a universal one. Dealing with grief and trying to reenter the flow of life in the midst of it are experiences shared by the speaker and the reader.

Laux begins by stating that no matter how difficult it is to carry the weight of grief, it has to be done. The speaker says that by rising and gathering momentum, the □dull strength□ is found to be in crowds of people. Laux then describes a young boy enthusiastically giving the speaker directions, which indicates that the speaker reached out to him first to ask for help. Rather than wandering around lost, she found the strength to ask for what she needed. This is relevant on a literal and figurative level. Next, Laux describes a woman who kindly opens a door for the speaker and then waits patiently as she goes through it. The speaker does not sense that the woman holding the door is in a rush to get on with her own business, but rather that she is content to extend this small kindness. That the speaker describes herself as an □empty body□ passing through the door, however, suggests two things. First, it suggests that the woman holding the door is unaware of the speaker's emotional state. Second, it suggests that the speaker feels numb to the pain of her own loss. This is a common feeling for those working through grief.

The speaker then remarks, □All day it continues, each kindness / reaching toward another.□ The speaker goes through the entire day feeling that the kindness that total strangers show to her becomes a sort of chain that gets her from the beginning of the day safely to the end. She feels that the comfort and support she receives are ongoing. When she gives the example of a stranger singing to no one as she passes, trees offering their blooms, and the smile of a □retarded child,□ the reader understands that the speaker has started to see her world through a particular lens. The speaker now sees the world as a place where everyone and everything reach out to her to ease her pain and bring her small joys. Of course, she is personalizing things that are not necessarily meant for her benefit, but that is not as important as the fact that the speaker chooses to embrace the world because she feels that it embraces her. She has adopted a very optimistic perspective.

When Laux next adds that □they□ always find her and seem to be waiting on her, she reveals how the speaker has come to believe that the world is not only kind to her but also actually waits on her and pursues her in order to protect her from her own despair. She sees the world not just as a temporary escape or distraction but indeed as her only hope for healing. She perceives the world as reaching out to her to save her from the pain that would drive her off the edge of her own grief. She rationalizes this idea by concluding that □they□ (the strangers) must have once been in her situation and therefore know what it is like to be summoned by pain, grief, and loneliness. The speaker feels that her despair tries to pull her away from the world and □off the edge,□ while the world tries to save her from herself. She describes the intangible nature of this

tug-of-war when she writes about □this temptation to step off the edge / and fall weightless, away from the world.□

Themes

Powerlessness and Weakness

The poem begins with the statement that regardless of the kind or size of grief, there is no choice but to carry it. The speaker then describes reengaging the world by simply rising and allowing momentum to build. Although momentum can produce speed and be powerful (especially when something heavy is gaining momentum), it is not an image of personal power. Momentum is not speed that is controlled or guided. When it is used as a metaphor in the poem, it depicts speed acting on its own. The momentum in the speaker's life is an unknown, as the rest of the poem indicates. Whether the momentum will build and take the speaker hurtling deeper into despair or lift her out of despair and back into normalcy and contentment remains to be seen. Regardless, the speaker is not in the driver's seat.

The speaker seems very clear about how she thinks and feels and how she perceives the world, but she understands her own powerlessness to direct her path to healing. She uses □dull strength□ to get through crowds, and she is in an □empty body□ that is □weightless□ at the end of the poem. She finds herself in a world that pursues her to save her, while at the same time she feels the pull of despair and destruction. Despite being in the middle of this tug-of-war, she makes no apparent effort to move in one direction or another. She seems to be at the mercy of her own struggle, destined to go to whichever side is ultimately the stronger of the two.

Hope and Support

The main idea of □For the Sake of Strangers□ is that deep despair can be cured by the kindness of strangers. The speaker describes interactions with a series of strangers who, despite knowing nothing of the pain of her emotional struggles, show her enough kindness to give her hope that she can pass through her pain as surely as she passes through the glass door held open by the patient woman in lines 6 and 7. The speaker also encounters a boy who gladly gives her directions, a singing stranger, a smiling child, and even a blossoming tree. In the speaker's mind, all of these people and things regard her as someone deserving of kindness, and they make an effort to reach out to her in her time of need. This feeling of being supported and embraced by the world gives the speaker hope. Without that sense of support and embrace, she is certain that she would be so consumed by her own despair that she would give in to the □temptation to step off the edge / and fall weightless, away from the world.□ To her, the world itself holds her close, encouraging her to stay with it. In fact, the world is so committed to holding on to her and keeping her from the edge that it pursues her and waits for her (lines 13-15). The world and its inhabitants are protective of the speaker and seem to have a stake in her recovery from her grief.

Emotional Healing

Although the poem ends before the speaker has healed from her grief, Laux gives the reader some indications about the first steps to take. The speaker moves toward her recovery both passively and actively. Passively, she accepts the help of strangers and interprets their actions in a way that makes her feel loved and supported. Before she can benefit from what strangers offer her, however, she must actively choose to reenter her community and interact there. In the third line, Laux says, "We rise and gather momentum." Although the momentum may be involuntary, the choice to rise is not. The speaker makes a decision to get up and be among other people. The first person with whom she feels a connection is a boy giving her directions. This implies that she asked him for directions rather than choosing to wander aimlessly. Her decision to ask for directions is a decision not only to engage a person in an interaction but also to make a choice about where she wants to go. Without the speaker's active and passive steps toward her own healing, she would be doomed to "step off the edge / . . . away from the world."

Style

Conversational Tone

Laux maintains a conversational, emotionless tone in □For the Sake of Strangers□ despite the subject matter. She achieves this tone by using a stream-of-consciousness flow, few literary devices, free verse, and informal language. This casual tone indicates that the speaker is aware of her difficult situation but is numb to the painful emotions associated with it. Whether she is speaking to someone or merely recording her thoughts, she comes across as more of a narrator than a person struggling through grief. This reveals a great deal about the speaker's emotional state.

Stream of Consciousness

□For the Sake of Strangers□ is written in a stream-of-consciousness style that gives the poem a very spontaneous, honest feel. Readers feel that they are listening in on the speaker's private thoughts and are given a special insight into how she perceives the world. As her perception of the world changes, her language and observations reflect that in a very honest, believable way. This type of writing also makes it easy for readers to relate to the speaker and move into the flow of the poem without the hindrances of formality, structure, or carefully chosen words. A stream-of-consciousness poem gives readers the speaker's unedited thoughts and feelings, and it is therefore both honest and personal.

Free Verse

□For the Sake of Strangers□ is written in free verse, which is unrhymed verse without metrical constraints. Free verse sounds like everyday conversation. The use of free verse is more common in modern poetry, and many readers find it less formal and more accessible. In □For the Sake of Strangers,□ the use of free verse allows the speaker to express herself in a straightforward manner that has a spontaneous, natural quality.

Historical Context

In America, the early 1990s were years of general economic and political stability, technological and medical progress, social stability, and vibrant culture. President George H. W. Bush held office from 1989 to 1993. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev held a summit in 1991, officially ending the cold war. Military efforts were made by American troops in other parts of the world, including the Middle East and Somalia, but people were safe at home and supportive of the troops abroad. The Gulf War (1990-1991) protected Kuwait from the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's invasion and liberated the small nation. The 1990s began with the reunification of Germany and the end of apartheid in South Africa, so people felt that things were improving globally as well. Although Bush's popularity was strong during and after his military endeavors, it waned when the recession of the late 1980s failed to improve.

Famous Americans of the early 1990s included Steve Jobs and Bill Gates as the faces of the rapidly progressing computer industry, Martha Stewart as the face of lavish entertaining at home, Ross Perot as the face of capitalism, and Michael Jordan and Andre Agassi as the faces of elite athletics. Popular music included grunge, rap, and hip-hop, and young people became more involved in their communities.

The 1990s had its share of tragedy, including the 1992 riots in Los Angeles following the acquittal of police officers who had been filmed beating a black man, Rodney King, after a traffic stop and the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City. Although life in America was certainly not perfect, the early 1990s were years of general well-being, security, opportunity, and contentment.

Critical Overview

Critics often describe Laux's poetic voice as strong and convincing. In the *Women's Review of Books*, Alison Townsend looks at *What We Carry*, the collection in which □For the Sake of Strangers□ was first published. Townsend comments, □Laux's voice is taut, tough, sensuous. . . . Her medium is the autobiographical lyric-narrative poem, but one so thoroughly grounded in the real world that it becomes a kind of transparent container, transmitting experience with uncanny immediacy.□ In *Ploughshares*, Philip Levine recommends *What We Carry* to readers, describing it as □gritty□ in its realistic depiction of modern life. Laux's reviewers often applaud her clarity of expression and her ability to bring to life an image or an experience. Townsend expresses a similar admiration when she comments that Laux gives □scrupulous attention to detail□ and □locates her poetry in the things of this world□the physical, the real, the daily.□ This is what is so appealing to many of Laux's readers; they can relate to her experiences as expressed in her poetry, because they tell the stories and describe the feelings of many women.

Laux's forthright style is so characteristic that, in a review of Laux's and Kim Addonizio's book *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*, Molly Bendall of the *Antioch Review* writes, □The passion toward poetry that these two writers/editors feel is certainly evident. What is also evident is their bias. They prefer the plain-spoken, direct, and easily explainable poem based on personal experience.□ Townsend finds *What We Carry* to be a particularly strong collection of Laux's poetry: □Laux's voice has always been wise, deep and completely unself-pitying. But there is in this collection a certain fullness of spirit.□

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Jennifer Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature and is an independent writer specializing in literature. In this essay, she follows the psychological journey of the speaker in Laux's poem.

As Laux's □For the Sake of Strangers□ opens, the speaker tells the reader that she is burdened by the weight of grief. The opening statement sets the stage for the poem that follows, emphasizing the speaker's emotional burden as the axis on which the rest of the poem will spin. In effect, the speaker introduces herself to the reader by identifying herself as a grief-stricken person. She does not tell the reader anything about the cause of her grief, how long she has been suffering, or how she feels about her difficult situation. Instead, she states matter-of-factly that people must carry painful burdens in life. As she continues, describing a day among strangers, she takes the reader on her psychological journey from pain to hope and healing.

In her first statement, the speaker explains that grief is a burden that is not only universal but also inescapable. She further suggests that grief comes in many packages, some small and some large. She says, □No matter what the grief, its weight, / we are obliged to carry it.□ By saying that it does not matter what the grief is or what its weight is, the speaker reveals that not all griefs are the same but they are all burdensome. From this, the reader understands that the speaker begins her psychological journey feeling trapped and burdened, with no way to free herself.

Despite her burden, the speaker manages to □rise and gather momentum□ as she ventures out in public. She has come to a point in her grief where she is motivated to muster what little energy and □dull strength□ she has to reenter society. At first, she sees the world as a place populated by faceless crowds (line 4). Because she sees only crowds through which she is pushing, she most likely feels as invisible to them as they are to her. She does not see any individuals, and because she makes no connection, she must feel that those in the crowd do not see her as an individual either. At this point in the poem, the speaker feels as lonely and isolated as she did in her own home. She is experiencing one of the ironies of human experience, feeling alone in a crowd.

Line 5 marks a turn with the words □And then.□ A change is taking place, and it happens in the form of a young boy who gives her directions □so avidly.□ The shift happens very subtly. First, strangers have changed from a crowd of indistinct people into a particular, enthusiastic young boy. Second, the reader can infer that since the young boy is giving directions, the speaker must have asked for them. In other words, it was she who first made the effort to reach out to interact with someone, rather than continuing to push through the crowd. Her effort is rewarded with the friendly, energetic help of a boy.

Next, a woman patiently holds open a glass door. The speaker realizes, as a result, that she is not invisible and that she is considered worthy of common courtesy. A stranger takes the time to hold open a door for her and then waits patiently as she goes through

it. The speaker describes her □empty body□ going through the door, but this is merely a description of how she feels, not how the woman sees her. Because she feels burdened by her grief and is depleted by it, she feels empty and numb, but she is discovering that feeling empty inside has not made her disappear altogether in the eyes of others. Just as she does in the interaction with the young boy, the speaker makes a decision to take action to engage the world. Here, she goes through a door, which seems a fairly passive thing to do□except for the fact that the door is glass. This means that she can see through the door, see what is on the other side, and she makes a choice to move knowingly from one place to another. On a literal level, this is a small but important step for someone so emotionally burdened. On a figurative level, however, this is a much bigger step, because it represents the speaker's willingness and ability to make choices that change her situation. Even though she does so cautiously (it is a door through which she can see, after all), the decision indicates that she is ready to take hold of her life again and choose to move in new directions.

In lines 8 and 9, the speaker claims that the rest of the day passes as a chain of kindness extended to her by strangers. The reader can safely assume that the speaker is recalling the day with a bit of selective memory, bringing her new perspective to her memory. She has come to see the world as a loving and supportive place; thinking back on the day, she recalls only the random acts of kindness that worked together to lift her spirits. The fact that her perception has become skewed toward her newfound optimism is clear in lines 9 through 12. In these lines, the speaker claims that □a stranger singing to no one,□ □trees offering their blossoms,□ and □a retarded child / who lifts his almond eyes and smiles□ are all offering love and kindness to her. The reader, of course, recognizes that the singing stranger is, in fact, singing to no one (including the speaker), the trees are merely obeying the laws of nature, and the child is probably smiling as an expression of his own contentment, not at being happy to see the speaker. These lines describe an important new phase of the speaker's psychological journey, because instead of seeing bleakness and isolation everywhere, the speaker sees optimism and caring□although here, too, the speaker's perceptions are subjective, emotional, and probably inaccurate. In short, the speaker has found a way to hope.

The speaker's newly hopeful outlook is carried a step further when she perceives the world not only as caring but also as protective of her. She remarks, □Somehow they always find me, seem even / to be waiting, determined to keep me / from myself.□ Unable to save herself from her own despair and uncertainty, she finds hope in believing that the world will take care of her, protecting her even from herself. The world of loving strangers finds her, waits for her, and seeks to guard her. She explains that they know about her innermost struggles, about □the thing that calls to me,□ because they have been in the same situation and heard the same call. Because they have survived their grief, they recognize it and know how to protect her from it. This is comforting to her because, at this point, she feels incapable of protecting herself in her grief. Notice how Laux creates subtle tension in the poem, reflecting the tension in the speaker's mind, by describing how the speaker □pushes□ herself through crowds in line 4 and is simultaneously pulled by the call of her despair in line 15. Because the speaker feels summoned by □the thing that calls to me□ to □step off the edge,□ it is

little wonder that she is so relieved to find that the world is peopled with strangers anxious to guide her to safety.

At the end of the poem, the speaker hints that her grief has driven her almost to the edge, where she is tempted to step off □and fall weightless, away from the world.□ This sounds as if the speaker has considered suicide as an antidote to her emotional suffering. The way she describes her feelings suggests that falling away is making a choice to step into a great unknown, which is frightening. Finding that strangers are so friendly and caring is certainly a relief, and even though she adds layers of fantasy to her encounters with the world, her decision to embrace a world that seems to embrace her is a step toward healing. She finds a way to feel less alone, less hopeless, and less vulnerable because complete strangers value her enough to reach out to her.

Given the course the poem takes, there is new insight in the speaker's first statement. It is interesting that she uses the word □obliged.□ This word carries two meanings and points to the two forces in the poem. From the speaker's point of view, □obliged□ means □obligated.□ Faced with a devastating experience, there is no escape but to feel grief and somehow to muddle through it. But □obliged□ can also mean □grateful,□ and this reflects the point of view of the strangers. As the speaker concludes, the strangers she has met throughout the day have actively pursued her in order to protect her from the devastation of grief that they have themselves managed to survive. They have already completed the psychological journey on which she finds herself, and they have the wisdom and perspective to see her situation more clearly than she does. Consequently, they are obliged to help her. In the opening line, the strangers are also □we.□ Read it again: □No matter what the grief, its weight, / we are obliged to carry it.□ The strangers are compassionate and insightful, and they are grateful to carry some of the speaker's burden for her. Perhaps the word □we□ indicates that, someday, the reader will heal from her pain and be able to extend kindness to others in their suffering, so that she can lighten their load as strangers have done for her.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on □For the Sake of Strangers,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Pamela Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in literary journals, and is an editor for a university publications department. In this essay, she examines the hopefulness in Laux's poem, made all the stronger by its close association with despair, isolation, and grim determination.

The first four lines of Laux's □For the Sake of Strangers□ suggest a generic □everyman□ persona□a voice common to all humankind in describing the □weight, / we are obliged to carry.□ The pronouns □we□ and □us□ imply the bond that runs throughout humanity. It is a bond that links the reader to the poet as well, as she relays her message about something □we□ all share: grief, heaviness, and the □dull strength□ that somehow gets us through.

These opening lines also appear to set the tone of the poem□somber, bleak, resigned. They depict a world in which people are burdened by sorrow and must accept that the best they can hope for is to find the will to □rise and gather momentum□ in order not to falter completely. One source of the weariness seems to be the □crowds□ that the individual must push through, implying that each of us is only one drop in a big sea or only an insignificant part of the masses. Interestingly, the idea of crowds points to strangers, and strangers are at the core of this poem's meaning.

The turning point in □For the Sake of Strangers□ comes early, in the fifth line of an eighteen-line poem. Here, the speaker takes center stage, and the generic □we□ persona is lost in the immediacy of one person's individual experience. The way Laux begins the line□□And then□□suggests a continuation of the sentiment already established, but the only thing that continues is the bond between human beings, and it grows stronger as the poem progresses.

Line 5 not only turns the □we□ into □me□ but also begins the introduction of strangers into the speaker's life. Here, a □young boy□ is helpful in giving directions□a seemingly simple, uneventful task, but he does it □so avidly.□ This description suggests an *intentional* act of kindness, a courtesy performed by someone anxious to do a good deed. The woman who holds open the door is portrayed as patient and, apparently, courteous and thoughtful. Notice, though, that the speaker describes herself□her □body□□as □empty.□ This self-evaluation is important in the poem, and the fact that it is presented rather subtly makes the personal appraisal all the more interesting.

Much of the remainder of the poem addresses the strangers whom the speaker encounters and the pleasant surprise she experiences at their unwarranted kindness. She even feels the warmth of □a retarded child□ who seems to connect with her with □his almond eyes.□ All day long, she passes by strangers who give new meaning to the wearisome □crowds□ that the speaker has always felt a need to shove her way through. The word □Somehow□ that begins line 13 implies that she does not know why her feelings of anonymity and emptiness are contradicted by the generous acts of strangers who make her feel special and not like just another face in the crowd.

The latter part of this work draws the speaker further into herself, and, at the same time, strengthens the bond between her and the strangers who, in a sense, come to her rescue. She reveals the emotional struggle and the inner turmoil that she carries as a □weight□□the □thing that calls□ to her, apparently from inside herself, where she cannot be free of it. The speaker does not, however, feel completely alone in her battle to resist the negative urges that haunt her. Instead, she reasons that the □thing□ that will not leave her alone □must have once called□ to the strangers as well. Again, she recognizes a bond between human beings, although a frightfully depressing one that tempts □us□ to □step off the edge□ and give up on life altogether.

The beginning and the ending of □For the Sake of Strangers□ are misleading in their grim tones and sorrowful messages. In a sense, they misrepresent the very core of the poem, disguising its deeper theme of hopefulness, kindness, and unity among the most unlikely people□total strangers. The connotations that surround grief, weight, dull strength, and the notion of stepping off the edge do not leave much room for considering anything positive, yet there is *something* that keeps the speaker going, something that prevents her from making the final □fall . . . away from the world.□ It is this element alone that points to the poem's central message of hope and survival.

None of the strangers whom the speaker encounters does anything particularly remarkable□they hold open a door, sing joyfully, smile at her. But she enhances these common, chance meetings by including an encounter of a different sort, one that would be truly remarkable, if taken literally: □trees / offering their blossoms□ just to make her feel better. Obviously, the trees are not doing anything intentional, but the speaker's perception of their desire to comfort her insinuates her own wish to be comforted. It also speaks to her finding such purpose and consolation in simple acts of strangers, acts that may commonly go unnoticed.

One may argue that the ending of a poem reflects its true sentiment, and that is a valid point to consider. In this case, however, the meatier part of the work lies in its middle lines. And if that is not enough to convince the skeptic, then the title itself needs to be pondered. The word □sake□ can mean both □behalf□ (welfare, interest, regard) and □purpose□ (reason, goal, aim), and, here, the latter is most pertinent. The strangers who pass by the speaker□actually acknowledging her existence□seem to be there for a reason. It is as if they are □waiting□ for her, □determined□ to keep her safe from her own despairing thoughts. By their sake, she is alive and even daring to be optimistic.

Overall, Laux presents a twofold poem. The speaker recognizes individual and personal human despondency but also concedes a general human bond that derives its power from the fact that it is shared. Yes, she carries the heavy weight of grief and, yes, she must often □rise and gather momentum□ in order to force herself to make it through the day. But her burdensome effort is then rewarded by an unexpected return effort from the □crowds□ she typically considers so taxing. Her ultimate assessment is that there is enough common good in humanity to outweigh the load of individual grief.

The idea of bearing a weight plays heavily in □For the Sake of Strangers,□ as it does in the collection in which the poem appears. Laux titled the book *What We Carry* to imply

an overall theme of human burden, and in some of the volume's works the weight is too much to bear. This poem, however, is at least one exception. Surely, the weight is heavy here, but it is mollified by a greater force□simple human kindness. It is a kindness made all the more special by the fact that it comes from strangers who could just as easily have ignored the speaker or even been rude to her, as the idea of □crowds□ often suggests.

While this is an admittedly brief poem, it is packed with both obvious messages about dealing with grief and more subtle notions on overcoming sorrow. The greatest difference lies in the smothering effect of self-absorption and the relief of opening oneself up to the bonds that tie the human race together. The word □strangers□ may connote a detached feeling by itself, but Laux has managed to bring it around to the same nuance as □friends.□ That alone says there is an overall spirit of *hope* in the poem.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on □For the Sake of Strangers,□ in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Topics for Further Study

Research the five stages of grief and determine at what stage the speaker is in at the time of the poem. What is the next stage? Write a poem expressing the speaker's feelings in the next stage. Determine what stylistic elements of □For the Sake of Strangers□ you think might still be appropriate for your poem and which should be changed to make your poem the best possible expression of the speaker's emotional progress.

In the poem, the speaker is in the midst of grief. Think of a time when you had to carry the weight of grief. Write about your experience of grief in a way that is most comfortable for you, telling how you felt when you were among people as you carried your private pain. For example, you may choose to write a poem, an essay, a song, or a monologue.

Using pictures from magazines, photocopies from books, or other items, create a collage depicting the people described in the poem. Arrange the images in a way you feel captures the spirit of the poem. Be sure to include a copy of the poem in your collage.

Take a walk in your community in an area where there are lots of different people. Take note of how many people are friendly to you and how many people do not seem to notice you at all. What is your general impression of strangers, based on this walk? How similar to or different from the experience of the speaker in □For the Sake of Strangers□ is yours? If you were taking the same walk during a time of personal struggle, would you be uplifted or further depressed? Using a camera and music you have chosen, create a visual presentation of your experience and show it to your class. Discuss your conclusions.

Read about depression to gain a better understanding of what sufferers experience. Look for at least five works of art that depict depression in different people, different times, or different settings. Make photocopies of the artwork you have chosen and compile them in a folder. Whenever possible, include information about the artists' motivations in creating the particular works.

The kind of emotional distress endured by the speaker in the poem is often described in literature. Find three examples of literary characters burdened by grief. Your examples should be drawn from varying time periods, cultures, and social circumstances. Write brief plot summaries of their stories, with character sketches. Recruit two friends for a dramatic presentation in which each of you plays the part of one of the characters. Your three characters will be engaged in discussion about their commonalities and their differences.

Compare and Contrast

1994: Most interaction between people is either in person or by telephone. Because people relate to each other through direct communication, most of the accepted rules of courtesy still govern interaction.

Today: With tens of millions of people using e-mail to do everything from keeping in touch with family members to selling their cars, the rules of social interaction are changing. The faceless nature of e-mail, coupled with the fact that communication does not take place in □real time,□ often makes people less inclined to adhere to traditional rules of courtesy and conduct.

1994: During the 1990s, awareness of psychological depression and its treatment make significant progress. In 1994, particular emphasis is given to research into the genetic causes of manic depression, or bipolar disorder. As a result of research and public education, depression carries less of a stigma than it did in the past, and people suffering with it are given more hope. Millions of patients approach their primary care physicians for help; about half are treated by their physicians, with the other half ultimately treated by psychotherapists. Treatments include therapy and prescribed antidepressant drugs.

Today: Being diagnosed with depression is rarely a shameful thing, and sufferers are offered psychological and medical support. Many antidepressants are available for prescription, and most licensed therapists have experience in this area. In addition to medication, patients are encouraged to make lifestyle changes to support their recovery.

1994: Americans enjoy a general sense of well-being. The economy in 1994 is stronger than it has been in years, and there are no international threats on American soil. Overseas, genocide begins in Rwanda as the Hutus begin to decimate the Tutsis, and American troops are sent to Haiti in an effort to end human rights violations and restore democracy. Many Americans are concerned about global tragedies but feel safe from threats at home.

Today: Having suffered the tragedy of September 11, 2001, in New York City, Washington, D.C., and western Pennsylvania and then the horrors of Hurricane Katrina in the Gulf Coast, Americans feel more vulnerable than they did in decades past. They feel the anxiety that comes with uncertainty and insecurity. Although these events remind Americans that they are not invincible, they do serve to bring them together with a stronger sense of community, charity, and compassion for each other.

What Do I Read Next?

Kim Addonizio's *Tell Me* (2000) contains deeply personal poetry that strives to show the darkness and light of her own experiences. Her subjects include family, love, heartbreak, and confession.

Written by Addonizio and Laux, *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry* (1997) is the poets' effort to share their wisdom and encouragement with would-be poets. They offer chapters on subject matter, the elements and craft of writing, and the life of a poet.

Compiled by Richard Ellman, *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry* (2nd ed., 1988) offers anyone interested in sampling modern poetry a wide range of writers, styles, and subjects. The introduction to each poet's section gives the reader background and context that helps to better understand and appreciate the poet's work.

Laux's *What We Carry* (1994), is considered by critics to be a good representation of her work in general. In it, she explores themes of femininity, sexuality, struggle, and everyday life.

Further Study

Ellmann, Richard, and Robert O'Clair, *Modern Poems: A Norton Introduction*, Norton, 1989.

One of the most respected publishers of literary anthologies offers this collection of works by 119 poets, along with essays about the poets and about reading poetry. The styles and perspectives of the poets are wide-ranging, giving the reader a grasp of modern poetry.

George, Don, ed., *The Kindness of Strangers*, Lonely Planet, 2003.

This book contains excerpts from the writings of various travel writers who find that their journeys around the world often bring them in contact with warm, generous people who offer help and encouragement. Collectively, these stories point to the basic goodness of people regardless of culture or situation.

Kowit, Steve, *In the Palm of Your Hand: The Poet's Portable Workshop*, Tilbury House, 1995.

Kowit offers numerous exercises and examples to help students understand what makes poetry good and how to write it. The lessons are meant for beginning and experienced poets alike.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth, and David Kessler, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages*, Scribners, 2005.

Kübler-Ross originally established the five stages of grief for the dying, but her life's work led her to realize that they were also useful for the surviving loved ones. In this book, Kübler-Ross elaborates on her findings, offering research and wisdom to comfort the hurting.

Laux, Dorianne, *Awake*, BOA, 1990.

This was the first collection of poetry that featured only Laux's work. Consistent with her later collections, her style here is straightforward and strong, and her subject matter includes the best and worst of human experience.

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Bendall, Molly, Review of *The Poet's Companion: A Guide to the Pleasures of Writing Poetry*, in *Antioch Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Spring 1998, p. 246.

Housden, Roger, □For the Sake of Strangers,□ in *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime*, Harmony Books, 2004, pp. 57-64.

Laux, Dorianne, □For the Sake of Strangers,□ *What We Carry*, Boa Editions, 1994, p. 23.

Levine, Philip, □Editor's Shelf,□ in *Ploughshares*, Vol. 21/1, No. 66, Spring 1995, p. 202.

Townsend, Alison, Review of *What We Carry*, in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 12, No. 2, November 1994, pp. 19-20.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Poetry for Students (PfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, PfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently

studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of PfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of PfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in PfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by PfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

PfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Poetry for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the PfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Poetry for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Poetry for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from PfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from PfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Poetry for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Poetry for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of PfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Poetry for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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