Last Request Study Guide

Last Request by Joel Brouwer

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Introduction

When Joel Brouwer's "Last Request" was published in his first (and only, to date) collection *Exactly What Happened* in 1999, it was one among many poems that surprised readers with a macabre subject and somewhat bizarre humor. With poem titles such as "Former Kenyan Parliament Member Arrested for 'Imagining the Death' of President Daniel Arap Moi," "Astronomers Detect Water in Distant Galaxy," and "Locking Up the Russian," Brouwer shows his audience up front that he is not afraid to break the rules of formal or "expected" poetry. His work tackles any and all topics, and "Last Request" is a good example. Its subject is not only strange and funny but frightening and tragic as well.

In this poem, the speaker requests that, after he dies, his body be entombed in a cardboard pyramid and placed in the backyard at first, then taken to a dump and left among the stench of spoiled food and hungry flies buzzing about the piles of garbage. As odd and deplorable as this sounds, the speaker presents a good case for his request and does so in simple, honest, perfectly sane language□in spite of his obviously crazy desire. "Last Request" is funny in places, sad in others, and always surprising. This mixture of intriguing qualities is what makes Brouwer's work stand out among the throng of young, contemporary American poets, and it is what makes this poem both delightful and depressing at the same time.

Author Biography

Joel Brouwer was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1968. He earned his bachelor's degree from Sarah Lawrence College in 1990 and a master's degree from Syracuse University in 1993. He was a visiting assistant professor in the creative writing department at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa for the 2000-2001 academic year. Though his poems are anything but typical contemporary mainstream works, they have been published in several of America's most prestigious journals, including the *Boston Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Paris Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Southwest Review*. In addition to his teaching position, he is also a freelance writer and critic and has written reviews for the *Progressive* and the *Harvard Review*.

The poem "Last Request" appears in Brouwer's first collection of poetry, *Exactly What Happened*, published in 1999. The manuscript was awarded the 1998 Verna Emery Prize by Purdue University Press and was published by Purdue the following year. In 2000, *Exactly What Happened* won the Larry Levis Reading Prize, awarded by Virginia Commonwealth University. Brouwer's often uncanny presentation of subject matter in his poetry, as well as his quirky sense of humor and tendency to pull poem titles directly from newspaper headlines, have gotten his work much attention from readers in both academic and nonacademic settings. He is currently at work on a collection of prose poems entitled *Centuries* and a collection of his more typically styled poems tentatively called *Reproductions of the Masters*. A prolific writer, Brouwer is also currently compiling essays for a book on the uses of history in contemporary poetry.

Poem Text

A pine box for me. I mean it.
My father.

For the record, friends and family,
I'd like a pyramid when I go.

A small one is fine: build it
out of cardboard in the backyard.

For mortar use duct tape
or school glue: nothing strong enough

to make it sturdy. I want it
to fall down a lot. Lay me in there naked

on the shadowed grass and,
whatever the weather,

wait outside all night.
No beer, no burgers or dancing,

no horseshoes. You may smoke. Talk quietly
if you must talk. Be very sad.

the wind will push the pyramid over often.
Grumble as you set it back up.

Let it be a hard night. Be bored
and edgy. Snap at each other. Yawn.

And just before dawn toss me and my pyramid
in the back of a pickup, drive us

to the dump, and dump us
on the tallest garbage mountain

you can find. It will be repulsive: flies
on my lips, old spaghetti sauce smeared

in my hair. Let it smell terrible.
Then go home. Quickly, before the cops show up

with their plastic bags and notebooks.

And on your way home, please

accept from me the only gift
I'll have to give: relief

You're not me. That even if this world
is a stagnant ditch between nothing

and nothing, you may at least
sip from it a little longer. Be glad,

and because I loved you,
forget me as fast as you can.

Plot Summary

Lines 1-2

Brouwer prefaces the poem "Last Request" with a line he attributes to his father speaking about his own burial: "A pine box for me. I mean it." Apparently, the older man would be content with a very simple, inexpensive interment, and he is adamant about it. The opening lines of the poem, then, present a stark contrast to the father's request. The speaker, or son, does not want a pine box but "a pyramid" when he dies, and he informs his "friends and family" about his request "for the record." Lines 1 and 2 provide the basis for a poem that becomes a list of instructions on how the speaker wants to be buried.

Lines 3-4

The pyramids of ancient Egypt represent a glorification of life after death, in particular the lives and deaths of pharaohs. Pyramids were built as monuments to house the tombs of the powerful, beloved kings, and death was seen as merely the beginning of a journey to the other world. In ancient Egypt, an individual's eternal life depended on the continued existence of the king, making the pharaoh's tomb a vital concern for the entire kingdom. But the speaker in "Last Request" is not a powerful ruler, and he humbly acknowledges this by asking for a modest pyramid: "A small one is fine," and it is all right to "build it / out of cardboard."

Lines 5-8

If the poem has not seemed bizarre enough at this point, these four lines are convincing of its odd subject. Here, the speaker admits that he does not want a sturdy, permanent burial place but rather one that will "fall down a lot." He okays the use of "duct tape / or school glue"□again two common, meager products that are in direct contrast to what one normally thinks of when considering a real pyramid. The Great Pyramid of Giza, today a part of Greater Cairo, Egypt, is the oldest yet only surviving "wonder" of the Seven Ancient Wonders of the World. This pyramid houses the tomb of Khufu (Cheops) and took over twenty years to build□hardly in line with the cardboard structure the poem's speaker requests. It is doubtful, too, that King Khufu went to his grave unclothed, for pharaohs were buried with most of their royal possessions to use in the afterlife. The speaker, however, humbly states, "Lay me in there naked."

Lines 9-11

These lines indicate a slight turn in the speaker's modest, obliging request to his family and friends. He is making his funeral and burial cheap for them, but "whatever the weather," he wants them to "wait outside all night." The thought here is both humorous

and horrifying, as one pictures a group of mourners huddled throughout the night□in rain, snow, sleet, whatever□around a poor cardboard pyramid with their loved one lying naked inside "on the shadowed grass."

Lines 12-14

The speaker's tone grows a bit more forceful and obstinate in these lines as he makes his instructions very clear in a no-nonsense manner. He dictates what the mourners may not eat or drink as well as what forms of entertainment they must not engage in. He reluctantly allows them to talk to each other if they "must," and he goes so far as to instruct them on their emotional mindset: "Be very sad."

Lines 15-18

The speaker predicts that "The wind will push the pyramid over often," just as he wants it to do, and he seems to enjoy the idea of having his friends and family "Grumble" each time they must set it upright. Lines 17 and 18 reflect more selfishness than humility in the speaker's request, as he wants it to "be a hard night" for those gathered around, and he wants them to be "bored / and edgy," hateful and tired.

Lines 19-20

As though to soften the harshness of the previous lines, the speaker now appeases his audience by allowing them to pay their respects to him by entering his "rickety tomb" and saying goodbye. Unable to let it go at that, however, he adds a further instruction: visit "one at a time."

Lines 21-24

Now the poem takes an even more peculiar turn as the speaker's request list becomes more outlandish and macabre. He apparently believes his dead body will be no different from garbage, and so he wants it taken, along with his pyramid, to a dump where it should be placed "on the tallest garbage mountain" his mourners can find.

Lines 25-27

The key word in these lines is "repulsive," for that is exactly the kind of scene they describe. The image of a dead loved one with flies on his lips and spaghetti sauce in his hair is obviously shocking and sickening. Adding to the visuals, Brouwer does not want readers to forget what this scene must smell like, too, and so, the reminder that it will "smell terrible."

Lines 28-29

Nearing the end of the to-do list for his friends and family, the speaker now allows them to go home. With tongue-in-cheek caution, he warns them against being caught dumping a dead body on a trash heap—an act that homicide detectives "with their plastic bags and notebooks" would hardly believe had been requested by the deceased.

Lines 30-32

Here, the poem begins to reveal its true meaning. This is the first mention of a "gift" that the speaker wants to leave for those he loved. After requesting such a gruesome funeral, the idea of telling his mourners to accept "the only gift" he will be able to give seems as strange as all the other orders he has given them. Line 32 ends with the revelation of the gift, but it is ambiguous at this point. Is his gift "relief" that the terrible night is over? Is it "relief" that his loved ones managed to honor his requests without getting arrested? Or is it something else—something even more unexpected?

Lines 33-36

In keeping with a typical Brouwer poem, yes, it is something even more unexpected. The speaker's gift to his friends and family is the relief they will find in knowing it was he who died and not they. Regardless of how saddened the loved ones are by his passing, they still relish their own lives, and the speaker readily acknowledges that fact. These lines contain the only true metaphor in this poem, and it is a powerful one. Calling the world "a stagnant ditch between nothing / and nothing," he inflicts a hard sentence on human society and yet determines that living in a bad world is still better than not living at all. In contrast to line 14 in which the speaker instructs his mourners to "Be very sad," he now tells them to "Be glad."

Lines 37-38

The poem ends with what is essentially the speaker's last request. While most dying people would want to be remembered—hopefully in a good way—by their friends and family, this potential dead man wants to be forgotten as quickly as his loved ones can manage to do so. The last two lines present an odd juxtaposition of emotions. To say "because I loved you" makes the speaker seem gentle and kind in stating his heartfelt affection for those he will leave behind, but finishing the phrase with the abrupt, rather crude comment "forget me as fast as you can" offsets the softer tone with yet a final bizarre twist.

Themes

Macabre Humor

Brouwer uses macabre humor in "Last Request" not only as a device to grab and keep the reader's attention but also as a set-up for the more somber□and separate□theme of the human will to live in spite of the world's problems. One's asking for his body, after death, to be placed in a pyramid is strange enough, but to want the pyramid constructed out of cardboard, duct tape, and school glue takes *strange* to a new level. The request is truly morbid and weird, but it is also funny. And as the speaker moves through his list of do's and don'ts for proper behavior at his odd funeral, the items become progressively more ghoulish, as well as more humorous. He does not mind if the wind blows the flimsy pyramid from his naked body, but he wants to be sure no one is eating hamburgers or playing horseshoes. He is adamant that friends and family members mourn him all night long, but he hopes they have a bad time while doing so. And as if they have not endured enough throughout the night, he adds to their anguish□and to the reader's delight□by asking them to "toss" him and his pyra- mid in a truck and take him to the dump for his final resting place. Brouwer paints a particularly gruesome scene at the dump, with flies stuck to the dead man's lips, rancid tomato sauce strung in his hair, and, of course, the horrible odor. This disgusting picture is softened somewhat by the offhand comment to hurry home "before the cops show up," but the reader is still left with a very ugly, very disturbing image in mind as the poem draws to a close. The ending, however, shifts away from both morbidity and humor, as the speaker requests something even more unexpected than any other item on his ghastly list.

The Will to Live

Although only a few lines in "Last Request" are dedicated to this theme, the idea of the human will to live, which comes in at the end, jolts the intellect harder than the exaggerated imagery and humor do. The final eight lines of the poem express a sentiment far different from the first threequarters of it, and the startling turnaround is what affords this theme such a powerful effect. After requesting friends and family to perform bizarre, disrespectful, and illegal acts, the speaker asks an even more dismaying favor□that each accepts the feeling of relief that comes with knowing he or she is still alive. While this feeling is certainly not unheard of□many people probably sit through funerals happy not to be the one the ceremony is *for*□it occurs in this poem at a point when human life and human dignity have just been dragged through some deep mud. Juxtaposed against a grotesque setting of an all-night funeral and a horrible garbage dump, the serene, calming notion of being able to "sip" from life a little longer takes on even greater significance. The water in the "stagnant ditch" of the world is still drinkable to the living, and the desire to be able to partake of it□no matter how filthy or vile□is a testament to the human will to hold on to life under any circumstances.

Style

"Last Request" is written in free verse with very little attention to any literary devices or poetic elements. If not for the line breaks dividing the work into couplets, one could hear it read and could think it was written as a simple prose paragraph. It is this simplicity of language and curt, direct sentences that enhance the poem's shocking subject. Using obvious, flowery meter or contrived metaphors to describe a dead body in a cardboard pyramid with family members standing around "bored / and edgy" would not be nearly as effective as Brouwer's somber, clear address. The speaker gives startling, to-the-point instructions throughout the poem, leading to the most surprising□and most disturbing□ request at the end. Note the simple language, yet horrific meaning, in such lines as: "For mortar use duct tape," "Lay me in there naked," "No beer, no burgers or dancing," "You may smoke," "Be very sad," "Yawn," "Then go home," "Be glad," and, finally, "forget me as fast as you can."

While the visual images evoked by "Last Request" are precise and easy to picture throughout the poem, Brouwer throws in an intriguing metaphor toward the end that conjures a mixed bag of dreary images. He likens the world to "a stagnant ditch between nothing / and nothing" that the living "may at least / sip from . . . a little longer." This analogy may be more poetic than anything else in the poem, but the fact that it stands alone makes it all the more important in the work. After reading through a string of direct, brief instructions, the reader is suddenly hit with a powerful, provocative metaphor that may elicit sadness and fear or even anger and shame. The point is that *some* emotion is called out, and it is a very effective way to end the poem.

Historical Context

Since Brouwer's first published book is only two years old as of this writing, a true historical perspective on his work, when it can be measured against the events of its time in a broader scope, is several years away. However, one can speculate fairly safely on the cultural, political, and social occurrences, as well as on the acts of some now notorious individuals, that could cause a poet to refer to the world in which he lives as a "stagnant ditch between nothing / and nothing." The last few years of the twentieth century were filled with news stories of unprecedented violence on American soil as well as continued conflicts in timeworn trouble spots across the globe. Problems between Israel and Palestine were nothing new in 1995, but in that year, Israel was shocked by violence within its own ranks when a young Jewish student assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. The student was angry with his leader for "giving" Israel to the Arabs. Although the Hebron Accord was designed to promote peace between Arabs and Jews, the pact was undermined by both sides when renewed terrorist acts broke out in 1997 and both sides tried to establish new settlements in spite of the non-expansionist agreement. In 1999, Israel elected its most decorated soldier, Ehud Barak, prime minister, and he has since come under fire for having no success in promoting peace in the Middle East.

But Israel and Palestine were hardly the only warring factions in the late 1990s. In Africa in 1997, Rwanda collapsed into civil war as violence between the ethnic groups Hutus and Tutsis tore the country apart. In 1998, the United States and Great Britain launched air strikes against Iraq in retaliation for Saddam Hussein's refusal to allow representatives from the United Nations access to Iraq's weaponry arsenals. And in 1999, Russia launched a major offensive against Chechnyan separatists, the second time in a decade that the Russians attempted to bring the rebels under control with warfare. The *threat* of war and unscrupulous power was also distressing in this period: France angered the international community by detonating five underground nuclear devices on two South Pacific atolls in 1995, and longtime enemies India and Pakistan both conducted underground nuclear tests in 1998, to the chagrin of the Western world.

Perhaps the most dismaying acts of violence in this decade came in the form of terrorism, both overseas and in the United States. In 1996, nineteen American servicemen were killed and hundreds were wounded in Saudi Arabia when a bomb planted in a fuel truck exploded in front of an apartment complex housing military personnel. Two years later, 258 people were killed when American embassies were destroyed by terrorist bombings, allegedly instigated by Islamic radical Osama bin Laden. The United States retaliated with air strikes against Afghanistan and Sudan. But no overseas terrorist act had as far-reaching and sobering effect on Americans as did the 1995 bombing of the Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City. Timothy McVeigh was arrested for causing the deaths of 168 children and adults in the worst terrorist attack to that date on American soil. McVeigh, scheduled for execution in May 2001, missed his first date with death when the FBI revealed that not all records had been turned over to the defense during the investigation; he was later executed in June 2001. Only a year after the Oklahoma bombing, the summer Olympic games were underway

in Atlanta when a bomb exploded in the city's Centennial Park, killing 1 and injuring 111. It was the onehundredth anniversary of the Olympics, a celebration cut short by terrorism. Also in 1996, the FBI received a tip from a terrorist's brother, leading to the arrest of Theodore Kaczynski, wanted for murdering three people and injuring twenty-three by sending mail bombs. Kaczynski had been on the run for seventeen years.

Not all the horrendous acts of violence committed during the time that Brouwer was writing poems for his first collection were politically motivated. Individuals also made decisions that would shock society for their barbarism and cruelty, seemingly based on personal agendas only. In 1995, in Union, South Carolina, Susan Smith was found guilty of drowning her two young sons in order to gain the affection of a man who did not want children. In 1997, thirty-nine members of the Heavens Gate cult committed suicide in California, believing that was the only way to get on board a space- ship supposedly following the path of the Hale- Bopp comet. Even more shocking was the 1999 slaughter at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, when two teenage students went on a shooting spree, killing fifteen and wounding twenty-three. The Columbine shooting was only one of a series of school violence incidents that has plagued the United States in recent years, furthering the fear, cynicism, doubt, and anger that many Americans contend with in their daily lives.

Reporting only the bad news from the past several years may be an unfair assessment of the historical and cultural events that occurred during this time. Surely, good things happened, too, and one could provide a list just as long on the accomplishments in medicine, civil rights, international relations, and many other venues that the world witnessed at the close of the twentieth century. The task, though, to provide a possible impetus for the dark conclusion that one young poet draws in one of his poems dictates a rundown of the just as dark events he read about, heard about, and saw on television while composing his work. All *bad* things considered, it is no wonder that Brouwer finds his world a "stagnant ditch," but, even so, he still admits it is best to "sip from it" as long as one can.

Critical Overview

Brouwer is a young poet whose first book has not yet had time to elicit a great deal of published criticism. Considering, however, that *Exactly What Happened* has already won two distinguished awards for poetry, one can safely assume that Brouwer's work has received favorable recognition from critics and readers in general. Brouwer was selected for one of the awards, the Verna Emery Poetry Prize sponsored by Purdue University, by Lucia Perillo, herself a former Emery winner in 1996. Writing for the university's press, Perillo describes *Exactly What Happened* as "both canny and innocent, hopeful one minute and bleak the next, and always mordantly funny." She goes on to say that the poems "are spoken in the voice of the guy on the corner, without any poetic curlicues" and that their subjects "will make you think that you can feel the poet's hand tipping your head so that the world came into focus at an angle slightly different from the way that you are used to seeing it."

Pleasant surprise is probably the most likely response among readers who are doubtful of contemporary poetry's merits, or of poetry as a whole. Critic Kevin Sampsell, writing for the online magazine *theStranger.com*, admits that he has "a bias against books published by university presses . . . . which are usually as dry and lifeless as a Christmas tree in January." After reading *Exactly What Happened*, Sampsell changed his mind, stating that "Brouwer's work does the opposite of what I expect from an academic press. It sparkles, hypnotizes, connects, and squeezes juice out of the poet's life and into your funny bone." This admitted about-face from a critic who does not mince words is one of the highest compliments a young poet could be handed.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Hill is the author of a poetry collection, has published widely in poetry journals, and is an associate editor for a university publications department. In the following essay, she addresses the humorous irony in the speaker's last request, claiming he has intentionally made the wish impossible to grant.

A cardboard pyramid instead of a satin-lined coffin. A naked body instead of one dressed in its best, or brand new, suit. An outdoor, all-night gathering of dubious mourners in bad weather instead of a quiet indoor vigil and service for loved ones. A clandestine drive in a pick-up truck to a garbage dump instead of a somber procession with a hearse carrying the dead to a pretty, well-manicured cemetery lawn. And, finally, an attempt to honor the last request of the dearly departed whose remains have just been left on a pile of garbage with flies on his lips and spaghetti sauce in his hair: you must forget him as fast as you can.

It is only fitting that a poem made up of brief, prosy couplets, each progressively more bizarre than the previous in meaning, and a wonderfully dry tone on the part of the speaker should end with a quick punch in the gut□and in the funny bone. Brouwer's "Last Request" does not disappoint. Even so, the last line□the *last request*□is still unexpected, for the reader is waiting for one more gruesome, off-the-wall solicitation from a speaker who has already put friends and family through unspeakable horrors regarding his burial preferences. But the poem ends with a seemingly loving touch, and the operative word here is *seemingly*. The next-to-last line implies a tender, emotional moment as the speaker at last admits his feelings toward his mourners: "because I loved you" resonates with affection, sweetness, and sincerity. What it leads into, however, is a bit puzzling. Does he love them so much that he cannot bear the thought of the pain and grief his death will cause and therefore he unselfishly gives them permission to forget him quickly and spare themselves the agony? Is this not an act of complete, altruistic love?

Hardly. It is, rather, a hilarious, ironic, and somewhat cruel joke on the "loved ones" left behind. After what they will have been through□ should they even decide to grant the speaker's wishes after he has actually died□how can they possibly forget him *ever*, much less *quickly*? The speaker has set up an intentional impasse for his friends and family. If they do not carry out his requests, they are guilty of denying a dead man his final wishes. If they do carry them out, they will certainly never be able to forget him. And that, of course, means they will never be able to carry out the last request.

All this may simply lead to the question, what's the point? Why make a final will and testament so difficult for those left behind to carry out, and, more so, why make the requests so weird? Brouwer's poem is a conundrum of sorts. It appears the speaker is just a self-centered, crude individual who wants to get the last laugh on his friends and family even after he is dead. But perhaps he is a frantic, despairing man, so desperate to hold on to life that he creates a panorama of sensory events□ granted, both strange and disgusting□to keep himself in the tangible world as long as possible. And perhaps

this explains why his to-do list becomes increasingly bizarre and offensive to the senses as one reads it from beginning to end. This progression into total repulsion is worth examining.

The first hint of oddness, of course, is the notion of being laid to rest in a cardboard pyramid so rickety and fragile that it keeps falling down. But it is a funny notion, one that is amusing to picture, not gruesome. Unfortunately, the humor is darkened somewhat by knowing that when the pyramid falls over, it exposes the *naked* body of a dead loved one. It is bad enough that his mourners have to keep getting glimpses of him at all, but to see the body in such a vulnerable□and embarrassing□state is particularly painful. But for the speaker, perhaps this is just a good way of staying in direct physical contact with the tangible world. Lying completely unclothed "on the shadowed grass" in "whatever the weather" is a purely sensory experience, something very attractive to one who is contemplating death.

Stanzas 6-9 contain a conglomeration of words describing things one can taste, smell, hear, and physically do: beer and burgers, dancing and playing horseshoes, smoking and talking, grumbling, snapping at each other, and yawning. The speaker has become very specific about the human activity he wants to control in the onlookers, but it is also the human activity that he will not be alive to participate in. This fact alone makes the senses of taste, smell, and hearing all the more vital, and being specific about them allows him to enjoy them a little longer. While there is nothing particularly ghoulish or disgusting about the activities and food he mentions in this list, the items do imply a growing desperation to be near what is *real*. His frenzy takes a big leap forward in the latter part of the poem when the speaker resorts to the truly revolting notion of having his dead, naked body dumped on a pile of garbage. Nevertheless, he still concentrates on the sensory experience it will evoke□the horrible sight of flies and spoiled food, the terrible odor, even an allusion to the sound of approaching sirens as the police arrive on the scene. The final sensory description is in the metaphor at the end. It, too, is repulsive□drinking stagnant water from a ditch□but it drives home the speaker's most important point: any kind of life is better than none at all.

Whether Brouwer's persona in "Last Request" is just a cruel, gross individual with a warped sense of humor or a thoughtful man desperate to point out the sanctity of life to his friends and family can- not be determined once and for all. Perhaps he is both. But one thing is certain: his last request cannot be honored by a normal-thinking human being. No one in his right mind could forget a friend□or a funeral□like this one.

Source: Pamela Steed Hill, Critical Essay on "Last Request," in *Poetry for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Adaptations

There are several Joel Brouwer poems posted on the Internet, although "Last Request" is not one of them at this time. Doing a general search under the poet's name brings up sites where the poems reside, as well as some reviews Brouwer has written for various publications.

Topics for Further Study

Write a poem about the kind of funeral you would prefer for yourself with as many details as possible and including descriptions of how friends and loved ones may respond to your ceremony.

Why do you think the speaker in Brouwer's poem selects a pyramid for his tomb? What connection might he feel with these ancient structures, and why would he want his own tomb to be so flimsy?

James Randi is an outspoken commentator on fraudulent psychics, magicians, and so forth. Read some of his research and write an essay on whether you agree or disagree with his controversial claims.

Pretend you are one of the onlookers at the speaker's all-night funeral in "Last Request" and that you are keeping a journal of the events. What would your entry include about the other people there, the weather, the pyramid itself, the mood of the evening, and so on. Be specific and feel free to quote the other mourners.

What Do I Read Next?

Reading Brouwer's book reviews of other contemporary poets' works provides insight on what he looks for in poetry and the elements he finds least appealing. He has written various reviews□ two in *Progressive* (Vol. 63, No. 8, August 1999; Vol. 63, No. 12, December 1999 respectively), for example.

The Complete Pyramids: Solving the Ancient Mysteries by Mark Lehner, published in 1997, is a thorough, fully illustrated compilation of every major pyramid of ancient Egypt. Lehner is a leading Egyptologist, and in this book he surveys the history, building, and purpose of the pyramids in extensive detail.

Brouwer's *Exactly What Happened* deals heavily with the concepts of illusion and truth and how a magician's work depends on the audience believing that what just happened really did happen. Harry Houdini is one of the most popular illusionists and escape artists in history, and many books have been written about him. *The Secrets of Houdini* by John Clucas Cannell, published in 1975, is one of the better books. It covers Houdini's life, the details of his famous escapes (except the water torture cell), and his fight against fraudulent mediums.

Albert Goldbarth has been writing poetry much longer than Brouwer, but the two poets' styles and quirky subject matter are similar. In 1990, Goldbarth released a collection called *Popular Culture*, including poems about Donald Duck being lost and trying to read Egyptian hieroglyphs to get back to Duckberg, and Orphan Annie and her dog passing by a line of people from Oklahoma waiting to eat at a soup kitchen.

Further Study

Brouwer, Joel, *This Just In*, Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center, 1998.

This is a chapbook of poems published by Brouwer while he was completing his first full-length manuscript, *Exactly What Happened*. The chapbook may be difficult to find without ordering it from the publisher, but it would be interesting to read the precursor to the intriguing full-length collection.

McDaniel, Jeffrey, *The Forgiveness Parade*, Manic D Press, 1998.

McDaniel is a contemporary poet to whom Joel Brouwer is sometimes compared. Like Brouwer, McDaniel is noted for his witty, uncanny presentations of subject matter and bizarre humor, and this collection is a good example of that.

Prufer, Kevin, ed., *The New Young American Poets: An Anthology*, Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.

Prufer was born in 1969 and grew up in Cleveland, Ohio, making him a close contemporary of Joel Brouwer in both time and place. This collection of young American poets does not include Brouwer's work, but the poems presented offer a good complement to his bold style and offbeat topics.

Sewell, Lisa, *The Way Out: Poems*, Alice James Books, 1998

This fascinating first collection by a young poet has been called both strange and beautiful, reflecting the more daring side of contemporary poetry, as does Brouwer's. Sewell's poems are sometimes quirky, sometimes bold, and always provocative. This collection is essentially a record of what it means to be an American living in the last years of the twentieth century.

Bibliography

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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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