

The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing Study Guide

The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing by Richard Hugo

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

The Triggering Town: Lectures and Essays on Poetry and Writing Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Writing off the Subject.....	4
The Triggering Town.....	6
Assumptions.....	7
Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching.....	8
Nuts and Bolts.....	10
In Defense of Creative-Writing Classes.....	11
Statements of Faith.....	13
Ci Vediamo.....	14
How Poets Make a Living.....	15
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	19
Themes.....	21
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	25
Topics for Discussion.....	26



Plot Summary

"The Triggering Town" is written by Richard Hugo with the intent of helping aspiring poets develop their own style of writing. In the course of the book Hugo shares with his readers some of his own personal writing techniques as well as some of the basic fundamentals of writing. Hugo also writes about Thomas Reothke, the poetry teacher who most influenced both his writing and teaching. The point Hugo hopes to convey to his readers most strongly is that he cannot teach any student to write. The only way to learn to write, Hugo stresses in his book, is for students to practice writing and develop their own personal technique.

Hugo starts his book by teaching students not to feel bound by their subject. He writes that although a poet may feel inspired by a particular idea, they shouldn't feel as if they have to write about the subject throughout their entire poem. Also in connection with writing, Hugo encourages his students to locate what he calls a triggering town. This town should be somewhat like the poet's hometown. It cannot be the poet's hometown, however, because this town holds too many personal memories and emotions for the poet.

Next, Hugo provides a list of assumptions he makes about the triggering town of each poem he writes. Interestingly these assumptions are often contradictory. From these assumptions Hugo moves on to discuss Roethke, his most influential writing teacher. After writing about Roethke's influence as both a teacher and a writer, Hugo shares basics of writing with his readers. These basics begin with which writing utensils a poet should use. Hugo also addresses more complex subjects such as how many syllables each line of a poem should include to make it most profound.

Hugo also includes in his book information in defense of creative writing classes. In this section Hugo explains why he believes creative writing classes are becoming so popular and also why so many literature professors look down on such classes. In his chapter "Statements of Faith" Hugo writes about the personality of the poet as well as the way the poet's lack of self acceptance helps them to create poetry.

In the next to last chapter Hugo talks about his experiences as a bombardier in Italy in World War II. He describes through his stories how he used these experiences to create poetry. Finally, Hugo discusses the differences between the poet in "real life" job settings and the one who works in the university.



Writing off the Subject

Writing off the Subject Summary and Analysis

"The Triggering Town" is written by Richard Hugo with the intent of helping aspiring poets develop their own style of writing. In the course of the book Hugo shares with his readers some of his own personal writing techniques as well as some of the fundamentals of poetry writing that he picked up over his years as a poet. Hugo also writes about Thomas Reothke, the poetry teacher who most influenced both his writing and teaching. The point Hugo hopes to convey to his readers most strongly is that he cannot teach any student to write. The only way to learn to write, Hugo stresses in his book, is for students to practice writing and develop their own personal technique.

Hugo begins his work by telling his readers he hopes they learn to write with their own technique instead of merely copying his style. He then indicates a writer should believe that truth must conform to the music of poetry. If a writer tries to conform the truth to their poetry, they will not be able to create effective poetry. Hugo insists that one of the biggest problems young poets face is that they get stuck in trying to write about a subject. Instead Hugo writes that new poets should separate themselves from their subject and just write. Poets should not build their poems on topics or sequences that make logical sense, they should depend on their feelings and the music of the words they use to hold their thoughts together.

The initiating or triggering subject should be a springboard from which the poet can leap into the creative process. Once this process has started, a poet should not feel bound to stark fact and knowledge but should instead rely on imagination and creativity. The most important thing to remember about writing poetry is that the writer must stay true to his feelings. His relation to the words he uses should be stronger than the relationship to the initiating subject.

Next, Hugo includes a poem written by Brewster Ghiselin, which he uses as an example of an excellent poem. Artistic qualities that make the poem excellent include the indication that the writer knows where the poem is set although this setting is never specified in the poem. Also, the poet's reason for writing the poem is never specified. The writer does not give an explanation or reason for his actions. Hugo then goes on to dissect the language of the poem. He discusses the differing impact of monosyllabic words as compared to multisyllabic words. Single syllable words, Hugo writes, indicate honesty, rigidity and toughness while words with more than one syllable show gentleness and compassion.

Finally, Hugo shares with the reader four lines from one of his own poems. He uses these lines to teach the method he used in this particular poem to leave his original triggering subject. He left this subject by concentrating on the sounds of his words and making a pattern with these sounds. Hugo seems particularly interested in using similar

sounding words in his poems. He also enjoys using repetitive sounds at certain intervals in his poems.



The Triggering Town

The Triggering Town Summary and Analysis

Hugo begins this chapter by drawing a parallel between writing poetry and writing news stories. News stories, he writes, use language merely to communicate information. In order to write good poetry one must weaken the bonds between the words and the subject and strengthen the bonds between the words and the writer. Hugo then writes about the triggering subject in poetry as if it were a town or towns. He uses this illustration of the triggering town also to explain why one shouldn't write a poem about something with which they are too emotionally involved. The home town represents situations that the writer is familiar with but has too many emotional ties to allow them to write a good poem. Although a person is more comfortable in their home town, they also know too much about the town to write a good poem about it. In an unfamiliar town, however, one can be free to be creative. They are not tied down by emotions or familiarity. Hugo also suggests the poet write his poem as if he were writing to a good friend or other trusted person.

Hugo next introduces his students to public and private poets. Public poets, he writes, are those to whom each word means to the poet the same thing it means to the reader. With private poets, however, there are words that have a different meaning for the poet than they may have for the reader. Hugo classifies himself as a private poet. These private poets take ownership of the words they use. According to Hugo, Hopkins and Yeats are private poets while Auden is a public poet.

Finally, Hugo warns his students that being boring in their poetry is preferable to being too various. In variety, he states, the poet is unable to use only words which have a special meaning to them. In fact, Hugo writes that most poets are repetitive and generally create the same poem over and over.

Once the writer has found a comfortable starting place that has no personal associations, he is free to start the poem. When the work is finished, he will have filled their triggering town with his own personality and in this way made the town and the poem his own. With enough work and enough time, a poet may even be able to write successfully about things that do have personal significance.

Assumptions

Assumptions Summary and Analysis

In this section Hugo writes about several assumptions he makes about each triggering town for each poem that he writes. Although the writer is often not aware of these assumptions, Hugo writes that these assumptions are often necessary for a well written poem. Hugo warns his students not to question the validity of these assumptions until the work is finished.

While reading this list of assumptions, it is interesting to note that many of Hugo's assumptions conflict with each other. Take, for instance, Hugo's assumptions about his own work in the town. In one assumption, he runs a hardware store that doesn't get much business. In another assumption Hugo runs a bar with constant business. In another he is the only person in town that works the second shift at a warehouse. Hugo also makes conflicting assumptions about the graveyards in his town. In one assumption the graveyards in the town are neglected. In the other, these same graveyards are taken good care of and a special day is set aside to honor those laid to rest.

Hugo goes on to list the assumptions he makes about the town's ballpark, the inhabitants of the jail, the habits of the people who live in the town and the town's newspaper. He also has these hidden assumptions about the town's mayor, the grocer, the druggist, the doctor and the owner of the movie theater. Finally, there are also assumptions made about the weather conditions in the town as well as the location of the town.



Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching

Stray Thoughts on Roethke and Teaching Summary and Analysis

Hugo begins this chapter with a description of Roethke, his writing teacher in the fall of 1947 at the University of Washington. Though Hugo insists Roethke didn't have a poor self image, Hugo writes the man's way of movement and poise indicated he had a bad opinion of himself. Though he was eager to please in his manner of teaching, especially eager to please the rich, Roethke had a very gruff teaching style. However, Roethke also appears to have had a kindness in him toward his writing students. Hugo's choice of including this teacher and fellow poet in his book indicates Roethke was one of the people who had the greatest influences on Hugo's writing.

Hugo writes that the most important quality Roethke instilled in his students was the love of the music of language and the emotions this music could evoke. He admits, however, that Roethke's influence over his students and their writing was hard or even impossible for some students to break. Hugo describes Roethke as being emotionally honest in his responses to poems although he sometimes didn't appear to understand what he had read. Roethke had the rare insight of realizing how difficult it is to write good poetry. He also knew how hard poets need to work in order to perfect their craft and be good writers.

In this chapter Hugo gives an example of a Roethke-like exercise in which students are given the words to use to create their poems along with a set of guidelines these poems must follow. While Hugo admits this exercise is cruel in its difficulty, it teaches the student to stop looking for the proper words to fit what they want to say. This exercise distracts the student's concentration from trying to make the poem fit an ideal. The student becomes so concerned about following the guidelines he is given he forgets about a topic or even writing a poem that makes sense. Using this exercise, the poet generally winds up writing a better poem than he ever believed he could.

While some students found it difficult to break away from Roethke's influence on their writing style, Hugo admits that it was hardest for him to break Roethke's influence on his teaching. Hugo writes during his first years of teaching he taught with a blustery style that imitated Roethke's style instead of trying to find his own style. Although he realizes Roethke's teaching style is not the best, he notes, however, that with the increasing number of good poets among today's English students, Roethke would have had a much easier time teaching in today's classes than those of the 1940's.

Hugo then makes a transition in his writing to discuss whether or not writing as a subject can be taught. He says that a teacher can teach a student what not to do in his writing, but writing is generally a process through which the writer must teach himself. There is



also no magic bullet to ensure creativity, Hugo writes. Good poems are written when a poet is honest about their emotions. He notes that competition is one aspect of a poet's personality that can ruin their creativity. Poets should not concentrate on being better than another writer. They should only concentrate on the feeling they have when they write their best work.



Nuts and Bolts

Nuts and Bolts Summary and Analysis

In this section of the book, Hugo shares with his readers the basics of poetry writing that have helped him most. These basics range from simple suggestions such as what type of pencil to use to more complex ideas such as the molding of words to convey a particular idea or emotion. Hugo also suggests that young writers carry a pocket notebook with them to jot down ideas and lines as they come to mind. This notebook can relieve a new poet the fear of losing good ideas.

Included in the basics, Hugo instructs his students to write with a pencil instead of a pen. The student should have plenty of pencils on hand so if one breaks, there is no need to stop to sharpen this writing utensil. Hugo also suggests writers use green paper instead of white because it is easier on the eyes. This paper should also be lined as a blank sheet gives the mind the idea that the page wants to be left alone and blank.

Among other suggestions, Hugo recommends poets write their poems out, post them, and read them several times out loud to make sure they sound correct to their own ears. Hugo also talks about the proper way to structure a poem. These include guidelines on the maximum and minimum number of words a sentence should have. Hugo also gives suggestions on the proper use of punctuation, verbs, nouns and even the questions they pose in their poems.

In the last half of this chapter Hugo uses his students' poems as presented to him in class as examples of what to do and what not to do when writing poems. Hugo takes individual poems and points out the problems with them. He then shows what steps the student should take to make his poem better and more forceful. One of the major problems that Hugo addresses is a lack of movement in poems. Overall, this section of the book illustrates how a few simple changes can make all the difference in the effect a poem will have on the reader.

In Defense of Creative-Writing Classes

In Defense of Creative-Writing Classes Summary and Analysis

Here Hugo discusses the need for creative writing classes and reasons why universities offer them. Hugo first points out that creative writing isn't a new idea; this type of writing has been around for more than 400 years. There was nearly a century, however, during which the creative writing class disappeared from school curricula. Recently creative writing has resurfaced in the English departments of most colleges. Hugo believes the English department is indeed where these creative writing classes belong. He points out that generally English departments fall short in their ability to teach students how to write. They assume those who can read can also write. Hugo notes that isn't always the case as many people who hold doctorates in English are unable to write sentences that make sense.

Creative writers in general, however, have a certain vulnerability about them, Hugo writes. He indicates that these writers are often disliked by their peers because of their ability to write well. This ability to write well is one of the privileges of being a writer. Unlike teachers who do not keep their writing skills in good shape, creative writers keep their skills honed. Unlike literature professors those who teach creative writing see results from their teaching almost immediately as their students' work is published in journals and other literature.

However, Hugo notes that the increase in the number of creative writing classes is disturbing. He believes this shows that today's students don't want to work hard and only take these creative writing classes for easy grades. This increase in the popularity of writing classes and decrease in the liking of literature classes has created hostility between these teachers in many universities. Hugo believes this hostility can be attributed to small-mindedness on the parts of both the writing and the literature professors.

Another reason Hugo believes literature classes aren't as popular as writing classes is because literature professors tend to lord their knowledge over their students. Instead of giving knowledge to the students, these professors seem to want to make their students feel ignorant because they don't know as much as the professor. The role of the literature professor should be to teach the students about the different styles and forms of literature that have been written. Students aren't able to learn much when the professor's only goal is to prove they know more than their students.

One problem Hugo sees with creative writing teachers is that it is hard to determine one's ability as a writing teacher. He believes these writers should be required to be out of school ten years before they are considered for a teaching job. During this time those hoping to become writing teachers should write and be published so there is proof they actually are able to write. Another problem surfaces with graduate programs in creative

writing. Hugo notes is that it is hard to judge which students should and which students shouldn't be admitted into these classes.

Of all the information about the pros and cons of creative writing classes that Hugo includes in this chapter the greatest benefit of these classes is that they allow the person to be themselves. Hugo writes that he learned this lesson from a high school teacher. The creative writing class is the only class where a student can use examples from their own life and have these experiences appreciated.



Statements of Faith

Statements of Faith Summary and Analysis

Among all the techniques poets use to help themselves write better, Hugo argues that the most important asset that a poet has is how he thinks and what he believes about himself. Fear of failure and the pressure of success are two things poets handle badly. Hugo explains this is because these poets either feel badly about themselves because they can't write up to the standard they expect or they can't achieve a level they had achieved in the past.

Hugo explains that all poets can be divided into two different classes or groupings. He names these poets either Krebs poets or Snopes poets, depending on the way they feel about themselves. Krebs poets accept themselves as insiders. They know how things work. Poets of this type include Ezra Pound and e.e.cummings. Snopes poets, however, feel they are outsiders. Examples of these poets include T.S.Elliot and Theodore Roethke. Hugo believes that of these two types of poets, Snopes poets have the hardest time dealing with success. However, the poet's natural inability to accept themselves gives them an inner critic which can be of great use to them. When a poet finishes putting down all of his thoughts and feelings, he must use this inner critic when he goes back and critiques his own work.

Among the points Hugo makes about the ways in which poets use their own feelings about themselves and the world to create good poems is the idea that writing can be used as a way to perfect the self. Hugo indicates that writing can help the writer become closer to the perfect self he envisions. In the process of writing this perfect self also transforms to become more like the actual self that exists.



Ci Vediamo

Ci Vediamo Summary and Analysis

Although not specifically about writing, this chapter is perhaps the most important in the book because it gives the reader a glimpse into Hugo's personal experiences that molded his poetry. In this section Hugo writes about the time he was employed as a bombardier in Italy in World War II. Several years after the war, Hugo and his wife travel back to Italy to visit the places that were familiar to Hugo during his combat days. Through his poetry, he deals with the changes he finds as well as the emotions and feelings from his days in combat. Right away Hugo discloses his sense of humor when writing about how bad of a bomber he was during combat. He jokes about not only missing his target located in the Brenner Pass, but also missing the entire Brenner Pass.

During this chapter, Hugo also deals with the emotional difficulties of having to face Italy and his memories of war again. Hugo is surprised at how much the land of Italy has changed and improved since the war. He remembers the darkness and drabness of Italy during the war. Hugo also gives a glimpse into his personality when he tells the story of a time when he rode in the car with a British earl. Hugo admits that while he talked incessantly, he admired the earl's cool and composed demeanor. This earl represented to Hugo the type of person he wanted to be. Although he couldn't be this person in real life, he did use his poetry to appear composed and in control.

During his second trip to Italy Hugo wants to find two special places. One of these places is the site where the squadron was formerly based while he served in the armed forces. The other is a field outside of the town of Spinazzola. It was in this field that Hugo found himself lost and alone. Here he had the experience that his psychiatrist describes as "giving up." Hugo writes the poem "Centuries Near Spinnazola" about this experience. He notes that in his original he even spells the name of the town because he knew so little about it.

At the conclusion of this chapter, Hugo is moved to tears by an old friend from the war. This man, named Vincenzo, had worked on the American air bases when he was a young boy. Hugo employs Vincenzo to help him find the location of his former squadron. After they have found the squadron and prepare to part at Hugo's hotel Vincenzo tells Hugo that of all the American soldiers, Hugo was the only one he knew of who had ever come back to Italy. Vincenzo's statement "Come mio fratello" indicates he views Hugo as a brother. However it is only after Hugo has entered his hotel room that he allows his tears to flow freely.



How Poets Make a Living

How Poets Make a Living Summary and Analysis

In this concluding chapter of the book, Hugo attempts to define some differences of a poet working in the "real world" and a poet working in a university. First, Hugo defends the university as being just as much if not more real than his time spent working in other jobs. He writes that although he deals with students, he is also faced with more real world issues that he ever was in his factory job.

Hugo goes on to describe the one work incident that inspired a poem. This incident occurred when Hugo worked at Boeing. Hugo's supervisor tells him about a situation where a squatter had to be evicted from company land. Although the poem grew mostly from Hugo's memory, it was well received by Boeing employees. Many requested copies of the work.

Finally Hugo admits that "as a person" he likes working at a university better than he did working at a factory. Reasons for this preference include the fact that the university is the only reliable audience for poetry. Hugo also notes that he enjoys working with students.



Characters

Richard Hugo

Hugo is the writer of "The Triggering Town." He studied creative writing in college. Later Hugo went on to write poems and also to teach creative writing. Before he became a creative writing teacher, however, Hugo served in the armed forces during World War II. Several poems which Hugo shares in his book were written based on experiences he had during his time in the armed forces. At one point in the book Hugo writes about the time he returned to Italy after the war was over. Also, before beginning his teaching career, Hugo worked for Boeing at an airplane factory. Even during this time Hugo was writing poems about his experiences.

Hugo writes his book not so much because he wants to teach people to write in the way that he does, but more because he wants to teach students to develop their own style of writing. He offers these students a variety of tips and techniques that he has learned through his own writing experiences. Students are free to choose which techniques work for them and discard the ones that don't.

Hugo sees himself as a loose-tongued and overly-soft person. He admires the strong, detached and composed men that he meets. These include men like the earl described in Chapter 8 of "The Triggering Town" as well as Herbert Marshall and actor Humphrey Bogart. In his writing, Hugo finds he can make up for these things he sees as character flaws in himself. Although he did not feel he lived his life in a brave and detached manner, he can make up for it by writing poems in this style.

Theodore Roethke

According to Hugo, Roethke was one of the best poetry teachers to ever exist. Roethke taught Hugo at the University of Washington during the year of 1947. He gave to Hugo and his other students what Hugo describes as the love for the sound of the English language and the emotions that it could uncover.

Although Roethke held great influence over both Hugo's writing and teaching styles, there were topics on which the two disagreed. For instance, Roethke believed madness, in this case insanity, was important to creativity. Hugo, on the other hand, saw mental illness as a crippling disability, not a circumstance ideal for creativity. Roethke was distrusted late in his career by Hugo when Roethke indicated he was happy. Hugo, however, admits that he now knows he misunderstood what Roethke meant by being happy. As he grew and matured, Hugo came to understand that Roethke was happy in the sense that the way he felt about himself had improved.



Belle McKensie

McKensie was Hugo's creative writing teacher in high school. During one of McKensie's classes a shy young teenager stood up and read a story he'd written about an experience at a whorehouse. Although the students expected the boy to be expelled from the class, McKensie instead applauded the boy's honest writing. It was from this experience that Hugo learned creative writing classes are the only place a person can go where their life is still important.

William Butler Yeats

Yeats is an Irish poet who points out that one's most important arguments are with themselves. Since Yeats uses words in a way so that they have a private meaning known only to Yeats, Yeats is what Hugo describes as a private poet. On the topic of writing poetry, Yeats says that what comes easily to a bad poet is difficult for a good poet.

W.H. Auden

Auden is an Anglo-American poet whom Hugo refers to often. Hugo sees Auden as a witty and clever writer. Auden is one of the poets whom Hugo indicates is smart enough to make the truth conform to the rhythm of poetry. He is what Hugo refers to as a public poet. In other words, there are no hidden or private meanings to any of the words that he uses. Auden's view of writing is that the poet becomes someone else during the time they are writing a poem. Hugo also notes that Auden believed that the fear of failure is the greatest enemy of the poet.

The Admiral

This is the name given to the insane man who had to be evicted from Boeing's property line. This poor, dirty man and his wife live in a shack located on property where the company hopes to build a sand-blast facility. The admiral becomes the main character in the only poem Hugo ever wrote that was inspired by a work related incident.

Vincenzo

Vincenzo is an Italian who worked on American air bases during World War II. Hugo met him during his time in the armed services then later encountered him again when he returned to Italy as a sight-seer. In Hugo's second trip to Italy Vincenzo assists him in locating the site of Hugo's squadron.



The earl

This unnamed member of the British aristocracy makes an impression on Hugo with his cool, collected nature. Hugo meets the earl while hitchhiking in Italy. The earl is one of the strong male figures that Hugo wishes he were more like.

Bill Kittredge

Kittredge is a colleague of Hugo who argues that writing must contain some amount of sentimentality in order to reveal the poet's true self.

Humphrey Bogart

Bogart is an actor and another man whom Hugo admired and wanted to be like. In the scene where Hugo rides with another soldier to buy liquor, he imagines himself being Bogart.



Objects/Places

The Triggering Subject

This is the subject a poet should use to start his poem. The poet should never feel compelled to stay on this subject throughout the poem but should instead use it merely as a creative starting place.

The Triggering Town

This triggering town also gives a writer a jumping off place for their writing. Though this town may be like the poet's hometown, it shouldn't be their actual hometown since there are too many personal memories and experiences associated with the hometown.

A Number 2 Pencil

This is the writing utensil Hugo recommends for his students to use when writing poetry.

National 43-581

This is the type and number of the writing tablets Hugo recommends. He warns against using unlined paper or even white paper as both these types of paper may inhibit the writing process.

The Field Outside Spinazzola

According to a psychoanalyst this is the field in which Hugo "gave up" after getting lost in the Italian countryside.

The Squadron area in Italy

This is one of the places Hugo wanted to find when he returned to Italy with his wife. The squadron area is where he lived for eight months while he fought in World War II.

A Pumphouse

This is where three whores set up shop outside the squadron area. Many of the soldiers contracted VD after being with these women.



A .45 Automatic

Hugo takes this gun with him when he goes with a friend to buy liquor for the troops. Hugo realizes how scared the children are of the American soldiers when he accidentally drops the gun out of his pocket and the streets automatically clear.

Brenner Pass

The place where Hugo claims he missed not only the target but also the entire pass during a bomb raid in World War II.

Boeing Aircraft Factory

Boeing is the factory where Hugo worked before becoming a creative writing teacher.



Themes

The Music of Language

It is this aspect of poetry, the music of the words, that Hugo seems to see as most important. To Hugo poetry is a form of music. Even though the words of the poem themselves may be meaningless, he insists that the way the words are put together and the sounds of these words can evoke emotion from the reader. It was this same music that Roethke taught Hugo to listen for and appreciate when Hugo was a student at the University of Washington. Hugo believed that Roethke could teach anyone to appreciate this musical quality of poetry.

Through an example of newspaper writing Hugo indicates that if language declines to the point that its only purpose is to convey information, then language will die. News stories lack the personal emotions and musical tones that are so important to poetry. Hugo uses the language of the newspaper to define an exact opposite to the language of poetry. Through this dramatic example it is easy to see the differences in the way language can be used.

In sections of the book that teach students how to format their poems, Hugo focuses strongly on rhythm and tone. Hugo talks about how monosyllabic words affect the reader as opposed to multisyllabic words. Hugo also talks about how to create rhythm using syllable and word choice. Above all the things he teaches, it seems most important to Hugo that he convey to students that poetry is about emotion and music more than just mere words.

The Triggering Subject

Hugo writes much about how a poet should and shouldn't begin a poem. He speaks of a triggering subject, which is basically a place for a poet to start. However, the poet should not feel bound to this subject throughout the entire poem. The poet should feel free to move to poem as far away from this subject as his emotions prompt him. This triggering subject is basically an idea that gets the poet's thoughts and emotions flowing.

In conjunction with this triggering subject, Hugo also speaks of a triggering town. This triggering town is basically the town or area which a poet chooses as a backdrop for his poem. Although poets may feel their triggering town should be their hometown Hugo warns against using a town where too much background information is known. It is easier to write about a town similar to the hometown yet unfamiliar enough to allow the poet to use their imagination. The poet should look at writing his poem from the stance of a person giving a best friend a tour of the area.

Types of Poets

There are two different places in "The Triggering Town" where Hugo characterizes poets into one of two groups. First Hugo characterizes poets as being either public or private. Public poets, Hugo says, are those to whom the words they use mean the same thing as they would mean to any other person. Private poets, on the other hand, will generally have a secret meaning behind the words they use. These special meanings are generally known only to the poet.

In another section of the book Hugo separates poets into another two groups. He refers to these groups as Snopes poets and Krebs poets. These poets are divided into categories based on their opinion of themselves and the way they relate to the world around them. Snopes poets will generally appear to be an outsider who wants to be included. Krebs poets, however, are already insiders.

Style

Perspective

Hugo is both a poet and a creative writing teacher. He studied writing under Roethke, a fellow poet who taught at the University of Washington. Hugo has published many poems, a few of which are included in "The Triggering Town." As a poet Hugo has both university and "real world" experience in life. He served in the armed forces in Italy during World War II and also worked at an aircraft factory for Boeing before becoming a writing teacher.

Hugo writes this book in order to share his writing experience and knowledge with other writers. He does not intend to teach students to write like himself, he simply hopes to help them find their own voices. He also hopes to help them past some of the initial problems and hardships associated with poetry writing. Although the book is probably aimed at the audience of college students, Hugo doesn't intend this book to be used as a textbook. Hugo's goal for this book is to encourage students to teach themselves to write.

Tone

This book is written very much in the subjective tone. It makes sense that Hugo would write in this subjective tone since he has such an aversion to the objective form of writing, such as that style used in newspaper writing. In fact, he notes that any language used only to pass along information is a dying form of communication.

By allowing his readers to feel his emotions through his writing, Hugo proves that he is genuine in his approach to writing poetry. There are a few places in his book where Hugo uses language some might consider dirty or crude. For instance in one place he tells people who claim not to be able to understand his poems to "screw off." Consider the context of this statement, however, before judging. Hugo is writing about the kind of person he is in his poems. This is the type person who would feel free telling people to screw off. In real life Hugo is not this brazen.

Structure

This book is divided into nine different chapters each of which discuss a different topic. In this first chapter Hugo encourages students not to feel like they have to concentrate their writing on a particular subject even if they feel like this subject is what they poem should be about. In the second chapter Hugo discusses from what stance a poet should begin a poem. Next he talks about the assumptions writers bring to their work. In other chapters Hugo talks about his most influential writing teacher as well as his experience as a bombardier in World War II.



Hugo's division of his information into chapters makes his book very well organized. It is very easy for the reader to follow the topic which Hugo is discussing. Often these topics tend to vary drastically from chapter to chapter. For instance one chapter is written about Hugo's experiences in World War II while the next addresses the topic of how a poet makes a living. While seemingly unrelated, these various topics give the reader a good idea about the type of person Hugo was and how his life experiences affected his writing.



Quotes

"In a sense, I hope I don't teach you how to write but how to teach yourself to write."
Chapter 1, pg. 3.

"You owe reality nothing and the truth about your feelings everything." Chapter 1, pg. 6.

"Since the majority of your reading has been newspapers, you are used to seeing language function this way. When you write a poem these relations must reverse themselves. That is, the relation of the words to the subject must weaken and the relation of the words to the writer (you) must take on strength." Chapter 2, pg. 11.

"It is narcissistic, vain, egotistical, unrealistic, selfish and hateful to assume emotional ownership of a town or a word. It is also essential." Chapter 2, pg. 14.

"Your triggering subjects are those that ignite your need for words." Chapter 2, pg. 15.

"It is important that that a poet not question his or her assumptions, at least not in the middle of composition. Finish the poem first, then worry, if you have to, about being right or sane." Chapter 3, pg. 19.

"If a student wasn't a complete auditory clod, he could feel himself falling in love with the sounds of the words. To Roethke, that was the heart and soul of poetry. And that was his strength as a teacher: he gave students a love of the sound of language." Chapter 4, pg. 28.

"I found it much easier to shake Roethke's influence as a poet than as a teacher."
Chapter 4, pg. 32.

"Quest for a self is fundamental to poetry." Chapter 4, pg. 33.

"Roethke's love of prizes, rave reviews, and applause would sometimes prevent him from emphasizing to the student the real reward of writing - that special private way you feel about your poems, the way you feel when you are finishing a poem you like."
Chapter 4, pg. 35.

"How you feel about yourself is probably the most important feeling you have. It colors all other feelings, and if you are a poet, it colors your writing. It may account for your writing." Chapter 7, pg. 67.

"I don't think Williams was advocating writing as therapy, nor the naïve idea that after writing a poem one is any less depraved. I believe Williams discovered that a lifetime of writing was a slow, accumulative way of accepting one's life as valid." Chapter 7, pg. 72.



Topics for Discussion

Consider Hugo's assumptions as listed in Chapter 3. How is it possible for Hugo to deal with such conflicting assumptions in his poetry?

Explore the ways in which Hugo's life experiences affected his poetry and how he used these experiences to write good poems.

Discuss Hugo's view of praise. Do you think praise ruins the poet? Why or why not?

Consider Hugo's view that having too much knowledge of the details of an event, such as the eviction in Chapter 9, keeps a poet from doing good work. Do you agree with his opinion? Why or why not?

In Chapter 8 Hugo includes a poem by the name of Index. After the poem, Hugo indicates that he doesn't even understand the material of the poem anymore. It is more important to understand the meaning of a poem, or the emotion the poet hoped to convey to the reader?

Consider the idea that madness, or mental illness, sparks creativity. Think about some of the poets who have been suspected of being mentally unstable. Do you think this instability added to or hindered their work? Why or why not?

Discuss the statement by William Carlos Williams that poets write to become better people. Do you agree with the statement? Why or why not?