What the Poets Could Have Been Study Guide

What the Poets Could Have Been by Julianna Baggott

Contents

Introduction

“What the Poets Could Have Been” is from Julianna Baggott’s first collection of poetry, *This Country of Mothers*, published in 2001. The poetry in this collection can best be defined as stories of family and of change and growth. These are poems of childhood, of parents and grandparents, of miscarriage and childbirth, and of the metamorphosis from daughter to mother. This collection is dedicated to Baggott’s mother, Glenda, and to her daughter, Phoebe, which is appropriate, since the poems are drawn from Baggott’s own memories of being a daughter and mother. “What the Poets Could Have Been” fits neatly into this collection of memories and transformation.

Like her novels, Baggott’s poetry is autobiographical. “What the Poets Could Have Been” is from chapter four of the collection, which includes poems that do not seem to fit neatly into the other four chapters of this book. The poems in this chapter are about spirituality and religion, about death and torture during war, and about being a poet. What they all have in common, though, is the poet’s response to events or people. “What the Poets Could Have Been” recognizes the journey that Baggott undertook in becoming a poet. In this poem, Baggott explores several aspects of the poet’s creative process, including the importance of imagination and creativity in producing poetry. One important aspect of “What the Poets Could Have Been” is Baggott’s conjecture regarding what poets might have done with their lives had they chosen different career paths. Baggott speculates on the role that poetry plays in the poet’s life. She also wonders what poets would have done instead had they chosen not to write. She finally wonders if paying more attention to lectures in school might have made them more content.

Author Biography

Julianna Baggott was born on September 10, 1969, in Wilmington, Delaware, and was raised in the nearby town of Newark. Baggott attended Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland, where she studied creative writing and French. While she was at Loyola, she also studied abroad at the Sorbonne in Paris, where she received a certificate in language proficiency in 1990. After she completed a bachelor's degree in 1991, Baggott went on to earn an M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of North Carolina in 1994. Baggott soon married David Scott, who was also a creative writing student at North Carolina.

In 1998, Baggott received a call from an agent asking if she was interested in writing a novel, and so she turned a short story, "Girl Talk," into a novel by the same name, which was published in 2001. At the same time, Baggott had a collection of poetry ready for publication. "What the Poets Could Have Been" is one of the poems in *This Country of Mothers*, Baggott's first collection which appeared in 2001. These first two books were quickly followed by two more novels, *The Miss America Family* (2002) and *The Madam* (2003). In 2004, Baggott published her first children's novel under her pen name, N. E. Bode. Her children's novels, *The Anybodies* (2004), *The Nobodies* (2005), and *The Somebodies* (2006), were a huge success with young readers. However, Baggott returned to adult readers with another book of poetry in 2006, *Lizzie Borden in Love: Poems in Women's Voices*, and a novel, *Which Brings Me to You: A Novel in Confession*, written in collaboration with Steve Almond. Baggott's third book of poetry, *Compulsions of Silkworms and Bees*, was published in 2007.

Baggott has received a number of awards for her writing. Her first book of poetry, *This Country of Mothers*, received the Crab Orchard Award for Poetry in 2000. Her third novel, *The Madam*, was nominated for the National Book Award in 2003. In 2004, Baggott's children's book, *The Anybodies*, was nominated for the Mark Twain Award in Missouri, the Diamond State Award in Delaware, the Maine Student Book Award, the Master List for the Pennsylvania Young Readers Choice Award, the Massachusetts' Children's Book Award, and the Nene Award in Hawaii. *The Anybodies* was as of early 2007 under development with Nickelodeon Movies at Paramount Studios.

Lizzie Borden in Love: Poems in Women's Voices was a 2006 nominee for the Pulitzer Prize. Baggott won the Lena-Miles Wever Todd Poetry Series Award for *Compulsions of Silkworms and Bees*. As of 2007, Baggott was teaching creative writing at Florida State University. She was living in Florida with her husband and their three children.

Plot Summary

Lines 1–5

In “What the Poets Could Have Been,” Baggott begins with the word, “if.” She repeats this word several times in the first lines of the poem and uses this repetitive format to imagine what poets might have done, had they not been poets, had they been able to hold their minds in check and not let their thoughts drift beyond what was expected of them. The “if” is what might have been. The title of the poem makes clear that the subject is an exploration of what poets could have been, had they been different; it points to this poem’s inquiry.

Baggott makes the differences between poets and other people clear in her opening lines. When the minds of people not destined to be poets are distracted, their thoughts turn to grocery lists. The minds of such people wander to commonplace errands of the day, trying to remember if they need milk and eggs or shoe polish. When most people smell the scent of lemons, they wonder if they need to buy more. But that is not true of the poet. According to Baggott, when poets smell lemons, they associate the scent with memories, in this case with a mother’s hands that smelled of lemon. In the first line, Baggott refers to poets as a group of people who get distracted in similar ways. She repeats the use of plural pronouns throughout these first few lines, using “they’d” and repeating the use of “their” several times. Baggott suggests that poets share certain traits. The use of “if they’d” or “if they” establishes both the imaginative possibilities and the connectedness of all poets, who can be identified through their inability to be commonplace or like the majority.

Lines 6–10

In line 6, Baggott uses the conditional “if” to refer to those times when the poets’ minds drifted in school, such as when the shop teacher, Mr. Twardus, lectures during shop class or when the home economics teacher, Mrs. Neff, expects careful attention to the hem of the apron being sewn. It is easy for a student’s mind to wander from a teacher’s lecture, and it frequently happens, but in these two examples, Baggott leads the reader to consider that for poets, this inability to pay attention to teachers is a sign of their creativity or of the talent that will be developed after high school. If the future poets had listened more in school, they might not have developed into poets later on.

Lines11–19

Line 11 repeats the use of “if” to remind readers of yet another distraction, but “only in some cases.” These words present yet another qualifier. If these future poets had been taller or less likely to fall deeply in love each time, if the world have been less tactile, with “less shine, blueness, ticking,” then these people would have been “repressible, contented.” In other words, they would not have developed into poets.

Future poets are impulsive in love; they jump the fence to “swim naked with a lover.” When in the water, these kinds of lovers, their “buoyant bodies drifting up” to the surface, are inspired by words, which also “bubble to the mind’s surface.” Soon-to-be poets are the type of people who are spontaneous, intense, and impetuous; They abandon the ordinary and spring toward the unusual.

In these last three lines before the poem’s first period, the poet provides of list of words, which are preceded once again by the word, “if.” The list consists of sensory perceptions: the “shine” of the sun, the “blueness” of the sky, the “ticking” of the clock, as time passes. The poet sees and feels these things more vividly than those non-poets. “If there were . . . less” of these beautiful sensations, Baggott concludes that the potential poets might have been “repressible, contented.”

Lines 19–28

Mid way through line 19, Baggott switches from the possibilities the lie before high school students to the realities of ordinary adult lives and work. The poet asks her readers to “imagine” adults engaged in ordinary work-related activity. In lines 19 and 20, the minister is weeding the church property; the librarian, who cannot take a trip to Paris, placates herself with a photograph of the Eiffel Tower; the coach with sweat on his face deals with the students; Levine has a lined face from having “stuck it out at Detroit Transmission.” These adults have settled for less than perhaps what they hoped for.

Baggott introduces the word “you” into the poem, and for the first time, she pulls the reader into the poem, making the poem about the reader as well as the poet. By using “you,” Baggott offers readers a chance to see themselves as a youngster again, a high school athlete, a baton twirler, a future poet. Readers are given the chance to imagine themselves as a part of this new world, in which the possibilities lie in the future.

Lines 29–36

The first word of the third sentence of the poem, at line 29, is once again “Imagine.” Finally, the poet moves away from the people who inhabit schools, church, library, and business, and asks the reader to imagine the poet’s family. The family sits all together on the back porch. They are made happy by “the simplest things,” sitting there together, smiling, drinking beer. They do not need much to make them smile—the company of family, a warm evening, a cold beer, and a twirling baton in the hands of a beloved child. They smile as they watch the child perform. They are made happier by watching the child’s attempts to catch the baton, in her “unsteady, opening hand.” The simple act of tossing the baton and catching is all that is required, but that is not enough for the child. Baggott inserts only a short phrase to suggest that for the child, the performance is not rewarding. The words, “not this, not words” reminds readers that the poet’s words are not what is making the aunts and uncles smile, even as the tossing of the baton does

not fulfill the child's dreams. These "words" demand more from the child than the act of twirling the baton.

Themes

Conformity

The whole premise of Baggott's poem is that future poets are not like other people when they are young. Those people who are not poets do not let their minds drift; instead they do what is expected. They conform. But they are not poets, whose minds drift from lemons to their mother's lemon-scented hands. Poets let their minds drift at school, as well. They do not conform, as other so-called good students do. Poets are not "attentive / to Mr. Twardus's lectures on manliness," nor are they "exacting of the apron hem" in home economics class. Poets do not conform in matters of love either. Poets fall more "deeply in love each time," and they are impetuous as well, "hopping the fence to swim naked with a lover."

Poets fail to conform in other ways as well. For instance, in lines 17 through 19, Baggott suggests that if poets were less connected to the world around them, they would more easily be contented and repressed. But they are stimulated a lot by the sensations nature works, by the "shine, blueness, ticking." They feel their bodies too much to be repressed. For poets, the sun is more intense and the sky more blue. They see the world intimately and respond to it, and this responsiveness causes their edgy discontent and their inability to be repressed or held back. Poets cannot conform, and they cannot settle for less.

Imagination

At line 19, Baggott asks her readers to "imagine" some very ordinary adults—the minister, the librarian, and the basketball coach, all working in their everyday, attending to their obligations. There is nothing ideal or special about what these adults are doing. The minister is weeding the chapel garden. The librarian, Lauterbach, may dream about Paris and seeing the Eiffel Tower, but the closest she gets is the open book on her desk with a photo. Clearly, the minister and the librarian have aspirations and dreams, but these scenes suggest those dreams were unfulfilled.

The next two people are the basketball coach and a boss. The reader identifies more intimately with the poet and poem if he or she also recognizes people and events from his or her past. Baggott uses the second person, "your," in the final segment of the poem, transporting the reader back into childhood and into a family gathering. Using the pronoun, "your," the poet invites the reader to recall moments in childhood when the act of pleasing the family was not what the reader really wished for herself.

Self-Discovery

In "What the Poets Could Have Been," the poet-speaker takes readers on a journey of self-discovery, in which they imagine for a few moments the possibilities that exist for

young people. She creates images of a world that is much more interesting for poets than for non-poets, and she leads readers to imagine different choices. Rather than the boredom of high school class, the poet escapes, letting his or her mind drift away from the drone of a teacher's lecture. This is an enviable escape that many readers will recognize. Instead of growing up to become one of those teachers, the young people whose minds drift grow up to be poets. These are the kind of people who fall more "deeply in love each time," and they "swim naked with a lover / in the county park pool." Readers may not identify with these images, but they are invited to see the beauty in the ability to feel more deeply or behave more impetuously. The intensity of experience that Baggott describes, even if not what the reader desires, leads readers toward understanding how individuals develop as they do and how adult work gets chosen. Modern poets in particular want readers to see a new world that is different from the old. Readers who are able to visualize the poet's world can learn more about their own world and more about themselves.

Style

End-Stopped Lines

End-stopped lines occur when a phrase or sentence ends at the end of a line with a mark of punctuation. In a few cases, such as at the end of lines two and three, Baggott uses a dash to signal a pause for the reader, but except for the dash, she rarely employs an end-stop, preferring instead to continue the thought into the next line.

Enjambment

Enjambment occurs when the grammatical sense of a line continues beyond the line's end into the next line. In this poem, Baggott uses enjambment to continue the thought through several lines, from the first line to line 19, where a period finally closes the opening thought.

Free Verse

Free verse is poetry with no predictable structure, rhyme scheme, or meter. Free verse allows the poet to fit the poetic line to the content of the poem. The poet is not restricted by the need to shape the poem to a particular meter but can instead create complex rhythm and syntax. Free verse is not the same as blank verse, which is unrhymed iambic pentameter. Free verse relies on line breaks and word choice to create the rhythm. Baggott's poem is an example of free verse. There is no pattern of rhyme or meter to "What the Poets Could Have Been," and instead, the irregular line breaks give the poem its rhythm, which is best appreciated by reading it aloud.

Line Breaks

Line breaks are a defining element of poetry. They are one characteristic that is used to impart meaning or to place emphasis on an idea, to create a rhyme or rhythm, or to lend a specific appearance to the poem on the page. Baggott uses line breaks to create a brief pause and to emphasize ideas. The use of a line break at line 16 emphasizes the importance of the list of words that follows at line 17: "if there were, in general, / less shine, blueness, ticking." Line breaks are not the same as the use of the dash at line 34, where Baggott wants to create more tension and put more emphasis on the words "not this, not words." The line breaks force the reader's attention on those words, whose meaning is just the opposite of the words that come before and follow.

Repetition

Repetition of a word, sound, or phrase is useful in emphasizing ideas in a poem. This stylistic device is one way to cue readers about what matters most. Baggott uses repetition to emphasize the idea that when other people are paying attention to some things, poets are distracted by other things, and in some cases, poets may look like they are not paying attention, but the fact is they are paying attention to what matters to them. For example, in the first line, the poet uses “drifted” to describe the poet’s mind moving away from the immediate subject—not to what follows in the poem (a grocery list, for example) but something else not all that explicitly identified in the poem. The next time the poet uses this word, she describes the lovers’ bodies in the pool, poetry (in the form of a metaphoric comparison) taking over in the phrasing: “their buoyant bodies drifting up / the way words bubble to the mind’s surface.” Here, the poet illustrates what in the first line a would-be poet’s mind drifts to: it drifts to words “that bubble to the mind’s surface,” irrepressibly and naturally coming into consciousness to describe the sensations of the fully lived experience. This immediacy of words and experience explains why the high-school-age future poets’ minds drift. The repetition cues readers to see the point not directly stated elsewhere in the poem.

Historical Context

Education and Hard Work

"What the Poets Could Have Been" was not published prior to its inclusion in *This Country of Mothers*, which was published in April 2001. Although the exact date of composition is unknown, it seems reasonable that the poem was probably composed late in the twentieth century, at some point close to its publication date. Baggott was readying her first collection of poems for publication against a backdrop of social, economic, and technological change.

The late twentieth century was a period of economic boom in the United States, and it was also a period that saw a greater emphasis on hard work, with U.S. citizens choosing to work longer hours and take fewer vacation days than workers in many other countries. This period also witnessed the birth of mass technology, with online use changing the way that people communicated with one another, shopped for clothing and other goods, or chose entertainment. While all this technology fed an economic boom, with low unemployment and huge growth in the stock market, for families the change was also felt in education. While the percentage of teens that completed high school rose significantly during the last years of the twentieth century, to a graduation rate of about 80 percent, the actual mechanics of education changed dramatically. It became clear that for many attending so-called brick and mortar schools was not the answer. Many parents decided that their children could be home schooled, and many others used online distance learning programs to augment traditional community schooling. There were special schools for teenagers who had become parents and special schools for troubled students who could not adapt to a traditional school setting. Some students wore uniforms and some students went to school year round. Unfortunately there were also school shootings, which reminded parents everywhere that not all schools were safe.

Baggott takes her readers back to high school and reminds them of shop class and home economics, and through a careful choice of words, she reminds readers of how bored students could be in class. It was not only poets whose minds drifted during these classes. But perhaps those who were attentive were, as Baggott proposes, more "repressible, [and] contented." Maybe those students did grow up to be more restrained and subdued, and maybe they were so controlled that they never thought about writing poetry. The use of the drug Ritalin increased dramatically in the 1990s as more students were diagnosed with attention deficit disorders, and teachers made more attempts to create "repressible, contented" students. Schools clearly had changed, but bored students had not, which accounts for the variety of options designed to keep students engaged in their education.

Dreams of Escape

In her poem, Baggott suggests different ways to escape mundane everyday life. The minister may escape in thought while he weeds the church garden. The librarian can imagine a dream escape to Paris while browsing through a picture book, and the basketball player gets called off the bench and is finally given the opportunity to play. Although life expectancy climbed to nearly seventy-seven years, in the United States many people spend more of that time at work. The International Labor Organization reported that by 1997, U.S workers were working the longest hours of any workforce in a major nation of the world. U.S. workers put in 77 more hours per year than Japanese workers and 234 more hours than Canadian workers. U.S. workers also worked 234 more hours than workers in Germany and 567 more hours than workers in Norway. All of this extra work added to the stress of everyday living. Americans chose many different ways to escape the stress of late-twentieth-century life, and there were plenty of things to make life stressful.

Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, leading to Operation Desert Storm and the Gulf War. The Bosnian civil war in 1992 and the killing fields of Rwanda in 1995 proved that genocide did not end with the World War II Holocaust. Both the World Trade Center bombing of 1993 and the Oklahoma City bombing of 1995 caused U.S. citizens to increasingly worry about terrorism, and in 1998, there was additional cause for concern when both Pakistan and India tested nuclear weapons. The world was undergoing many changes. The Taliban took over Afghanistan in 1996, and Hong Kong became part of China in 1997. NASA scientists announced in 1996 that a rock from Mars might once have known living creatures, and in 1997 Dolly became the first successfully cloned animal. In the United States, people found different ways to escape their concern about a world that seemed to defy control. Huge crowds flocked to theaters to see the ship, *Titanic*, sink and to see the long-awaited prequel to *Star Wars*. Other people dove into the latest John Grisham escapist story or tuned into *Seinfeld*. No matter the choice, there were many ways to escape the stresses of late-twentieth-century life. Baggott offers one other form of escape—the method employed by poets, who use words to imagine different lives.

Critical Overview

This Country of Mothers, Baggott's first published collection of poetry, won the Southern University Press Crab Orchard Award, which included a cash prize as well as an agreement to publish the book. As quoted in a release from the Southern Illinois University Press, in awarding the Crab Orchard prize, one of the judges, Rodney Jones, is reported to have stated that Baggott "is an accomplished poet of the eye and ear, of the definitive feminine experience, and her poems of private life are expansive enough to suggest a vision of a political and historical era." Although Jones does not specifically mention "What the Poets Could Have Been", he does point out that Baggott "draws themes as sharp as razors" and that her poems are "marvelously accessible." Jones's comments include the observation that "*This Country of Mothers* announces a poet of substantial powers."

The book also earned praise from several other reviewers. In a review for *Book Page*, Joanna Smith Rakoff links Baggott's poetry to her very successful novels, noting that the poems "wrestle with the same themes and ideas" as her first novel, *Girl Talk*. Rakoff points out that the poems are "narrated by a young American Everywoman, navigating her way through a generic and often cruel landscape." These are narrative poems, in which the speaker "strives to reconcile her growing spirituality with her intense skepticism." Rakoff claims that the narrative quality of the poems creates "compelling, breathless" works that should be read almost like a novel, "as the narrator engages with the literal and metaphysical worlds."

In the online forum, *Emerging Authors*, Dan Wickett's review of *This Country of Mothers* points out that "Baggott is not afraid to discuss her fears through her poems, to question both the positives and negatives of daily life and offer opinions." Wickett claims that in this collection of poetry Baggott "has nicely followed up on some of the themes of her debut novel," looking at the process of motherhood and moving through the "very personal journey of chronicling her own life." Wickett also compliments Baggott on the ease of understanding of her poems, which are "written so cleanly" that they are "entirely accessible." Wickett concludes that while Baggott's "poems are emotionally wrenching at times, and while certainly written from a feminine perspective, they should not be looked at as exclusive to women." Sales for this first collection of poetry were successful enough that the book went to a second printing, which is unusual for a book of poetry.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Karmiol holds a Ph.D. in English literature and is a university professor. In this essay, she discusses the self-conscious awareness of the poet, who uses her talent as a way to justify the poet's existence and give meaning to her work.

The desire to use poetry as a way to either justify its creation or explain its purpose is not new. Julianna Baggott's "What the Poets Could Have Been" is only one of many attempts to explore the power of poetry and its importance, which some poets think extends far beyond words on paper. In ancient Greece, poets wrote about the purpose of poetry, the need for poets to fulfill certain functions, and the importance of poetry in the world of human affairs. After the Roman conquest of the Greek city-states, Roman poets adopted the Greek value of poetry. Horace's *Ars Poetica* (Art of Poetry or Nature of Poetry) became the standard attempt by poets to define what poetry means. When, in the first century b.c.e. , Horace warned writers to "Examine well, ye writers, weigh with care, / What suits your genius; what your strengths can bear," he was only repeating Aristotle's earlier warnings. The power of poetry to influence people and actions, even political events, was well known. Horace claimed that poets should "Be delicate and cautious in the use / And choice of words," because he understood that words have power that extends beyond their value as literature. The lessons of two thousand years ago have not been lost on Baggott. In "What the Poets Could Have Been," Baggott focuses on the role that poetry plays in the poet's life and what it means to the reader, as well.

The poet is the one who responds to the 'shine, blueness, ticking' of life. To not respond means settling for life less fully lived. Poets deliver the fully lived life to their readers.

As early as 1956, an English professor named Robert Preyer lamented the fact that his academic colleagues did not read poetry. After acknowledging the complaints that readers express about the difficulty they have in appreciating poetry, Preyer tried to explain the importance of poetry and how poetry can enhance understanding. In his essay, "The Prejudice against Poetry: A Diagnosis and an Appeal," Preyer defends the importance of reading poetry, claiming that poetry is "an organization of experience capable of altering the present and creating new significances." For Preyer, poetry is a way to alter reality into something vastly different and perhaps more appealing. This is also true of Baggott's poem, which plays with reality and experience. In "What the Poets Could Have Been," Baggott captures the importance of poetry as a means to being alive fully in the world and through words bringing others to greater appreciation of sensory experience. For example, Baggott writes that people who have the potential to be poets are likely to hop a "fence to swim naked with a lover." The words conjure an image of impetuous desire, of living in the moment. Indeed, Baggott refers to the poet's many loves as having been felt more "deeply," somehow suggesting that the poet feels love with an unusual intensity. Moreover, the intensity stimulates words that, like lovers'

“buoyant bodies,” drift to the surface of the poet’s mind. The link between passion and poetry illustrates the value of the words and connects Baggott’s point to an ancient tradition of using poetry to convey romantic love and the risks it may induce lovers to take. Only poetry engages others in the lived experience in such an intimate way. Photography or paintings cannot capture the same intensity. The photographic image is flat and two-dimensional, but the poem brings the reader inside the world the words create, animating a sensed experience that exists off the page, as well as on it.

Like Preyer, Baggott understands the nature of the prejudice against poetry. Her poem, “What the Poets Could Have Been,” is both a justification for being a poet and a defense against those who do not pay attention to poetry. The lengthy dependent clause that begins the poem, with “If every time their minds drifted” and that ends only at lines 18 and 19 with “they could have been / repressible, contented,” makes clear that for Baggott, non-poets are those who are content with less emotion in their lives, who are more easily repressed. These non-poets are not the naked lovers. The non-poets are those who are likely to pay attention in class, to follow directions in sewing a hem; they are the ones who grow up to stick it out in jobs that line their faces. The poet is the one who responds to the “shine, blueness, ticking” of life. To not respond means settling for life less fully lived. Poets deliver the fully lived life to their readers.

Robert W. Blake, an English professor at SUNY College in New York, agrees that poetry alters the perceptions people have of the world. In his 1990 essay, “Poets on Poetry: Writing and the Reconstruction of Reality,” Blake asserts, “When one writes poetry, one reconstructs reality.” For example, Baggott asks readers to imaginatively jump from high school experience to the mundane work lives most adults make for themselves. She uses the minister and the librarian as examples of people, who may well have unlived dreams. The minister weeds the church property, while he may well wish he could as easily separate the bad from the good for his congregation. The librarian sits at her desk with an open travel book, displaying a photo of the Eiffel Tower. She may well have wanted to visit France, but she settles for a picture instead of reaching for the firsthand experience. “Poets,” Blake writes, “see the value of poetry in various ways. Poetry is like a lens or prism through which one views the world in a heightened way. Poetry is for telling people what they hadn’t noticed or thought about before.” Baggott makes her readers see inside the minister and librarian to intuit their hidden desires. In his essay, Blake argues that “poetry is using chosen words to reveal what people and living creatures are really like.” This revelation is the work of poetry.

Baggott is not the first woman to use poetry as a way to delve into the self-conscious, even as she creates a more intense reality for the reader. In the 1860s, Emily Dickinson visualized the poet as someone who “Distills amazing sense / From ordinary Meanings.” Ordinary flowers find their scent intensified to become a perfume, an “attar so immense” that it exceeds the flower’s common origins. The poet is someone who reveals meaning hiding in things and becomes, “Of Pictures, the Discloser.” Dickinson understood that the poet’s role in helping readers to imagine greater meanings from their experience. Dickinson also injects a certain amount of irony. Given the poet’s invaluable role in society, Dickinson acknowledges that those who are not poets lead poor lives by contrast: “The Poet—it is He—/ Entitles Us—by Contrast—/ To ceaseless Poverty.”

Baggott no doubt appreciates Dickinson's reference to poverty, but sees in it a different meaning. In several interviews, Baggott mentions how poor she and her poet husband were when they first began writing. For instance, in a fall 2001 interview with Cheryl Dellasega, Baggott states that when she completed her bachelor's degree in creative writing and French, "her father called it 'a degree in starvation and poverty.'" Baggott and her husband were poor enough that they took in boarders to help cover the cost of housing for their growing family. Still, there are rich compensations for a person who lives life as a poet, one who engages in the magical transformation of the ordinary.

In her poem, "What the Poets Could Have Been," Baggott justifies choosing to live as a poet. To have not become a poet would mean for her becoming something less, something more "repressible, contented," but she does not use the word, "happy." Baggott refers to "the simplest things" making her aunts and uncles "happy" as they sit on the back porch, but the child with the hidden words is not described as happy twirling her baton. Baggott shows her readers what these people kept hidden within and so transforms their reality into something magical. In his essay on the need for poetic recreations of reality, Blake captures the essence of the poet when he writes:

Poetry is for representing the sacredness of human existence. Poetry creates something that didn't exist before without destroying something else in the process. And poetry is for naming all the concrete things in our universe and, by naming, acknowledging their existence and ultimately placing them in an intuitively perceived order, which I call reconstructing reality.

Source:

Sheri Metzger Karmiol, Critical Essay on "What the Poets Could Have Been," in *Poetry for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Topics for Further Study

• Baggott's poetry is autobiographical. Make a list of at least seven to nine memories that are important to you. These should be the things that first come to mind when you think of your life. You might try to pick one or two items from each of the past several years. After you have a list, arrange them in order of importance. This order does not have to be chronological, but it can be. When you have brought some sort of order to your list, rewrite the list as a poem. Baggott's poem proposes that memories are interpreted differently by poets. After you complete your poem, write a brief critique in which you consider if your memories change when transformed into poetry.

• Select a poem by any nineteenth-century female poet and compare it to Baggott's poem "What the Poets Could Have Been." Compare such elements as content, theme, tone, and word choice. In your evaluation of these two works, consider the modernity of Baggott's poem. Do you think it is different in tone and content from the poem by the nineteenth century poet that you chose? How are the two poems similar or different?

• Take the first line of Baggott's poem "What the Poets Could Have Been," and use it as the first line of your own poem. Write a poem of at least twenty-five lines, using the same strategy of asking "what if" that Baggott uses. Choose a different career, perhaps that of movie star, politician, or singer, and create a poem exploring the kinds of traits that go into the career that you have chosen and how life would be different. Your poem should also incorporate a similar style. For instance, you should try to create a lengthy dependent clause that then leads into the main point of the poem, whatever that might be.

• Artists are often inspired by poets to create some of the most beautiful art imaginable. For instance, William Blake was inspired by John Milton's poetry to create illustrations of the poet's finest work, *Paradise Lost*. Spend some time looking through art books in the library and select a picture or illustration that you feel best illustrates Baggott's poem. Then, in an essay, compare the art that you have selected to the images that Baggott creates in her poem, noting both the similarities and the differences between the art and the poem.

• One of the best ways to learn about poetic form is to write poetry. Place yourself in Baggott's life or the life of any modern female poet whom you admire, and using her work as a guide, write at least one or two poems that imitate both her style, meter, and content. When you have completed your poems, write a brief evaluation of your work, comparing it to the poet's work. What have you learned about the difficulty of writing modern poetry?

• Baggott's novels are autobiographical and, in some cases, like poetry transformed into prose. Stories can also be transformed into poetry, which is what you will do. Instead of writing a research paper, this assignment asks you to write a research poem. Choose a famous woman from history and use at least one or two important events from her life to create a narrative poem about her. Remember that sometimes the most

interesting poetry does not rhyme. Instead, try to use free verse to capture the emotion and intensity of this woman's life.

What Do I Read Next?

- *Lizzie Borden in Love: Poems in Women's Voices*, Baggott's second collection of poetry and nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in Poetry in 2006, uses the voices of many women to offer commentaries about their lives. These poems include portrayals of Mary Todd Lincoln, Katherine Hepburn, and Monica Lewinsky, among others.

- *The Madam* is Baggott's third novel. Published in 2003, this novel is a fictionalized account of Baggott's great-grandmother's bordello, which operated in 1920s West Virginia.

- Baggott and Steve Almond collaborated on *Which Brings Me to You: A Novel in Confessions* (2006). This epistolary novel tells the story of two people who have an immediate attraction to one another and who use letters as a way to learn each other's romantic history.

- *The Anybodies* is Baggott's first children's novel under her pen name, N. E. Bode. This novel, published in 2004, is about the adventures of an eleven-year-old girl, who discovers she was switched at birth.

- Marian Coe's 2007 collection, *Between Us: Women's Voices Sharing Confidences, Earned Wisdom and Moments from Life: A Gift Package of Stories*, is a collection of poems, short stories, and essays that present brief vignettes drawn from women's lives.

- *Innovative Women Poets: An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry and Interviews* (2007), edited by Elisabeth A. Frost and Cynthia Hogue, is a collection of fourteen interviews with female poets from the last half of the twentieth century. These interviews provide an opportunity to understand the historical and cultural context of contemporary women's poetry.

Further Study

Behn, Robin, *The Practice of Poetry: Writing Exercises from Poets Who Teach*, Collins, 1992.

This book is ideal for anyone who wants to learn to write poetry. The book consists of a series of exercises designed to help would-be poets begin writing and finding their own poetic voices.

Germin, Pamela, *Sweeping Beauty: Contemporary Women Poets Do Housework*, University of Iowa Press, 2005.

This appropriately titled collection of poems focuses on what women most often do in the home—housework. Many of the poems in this collection, which includes a poem by Baggott, make readers laugh, but many more will cause readers to notice the exceptional female poets included in this book, who can turn even housework into art.

Mullaney, Janet Palmer, ed., *Truthtellers of the Times: Interviews with Contemporary Women Poets*, University of Michigan Press, 1999.

This collection of fifteen interviews includes a broad spectrum of women's voices, representing diversity in race, ethnicity, and age. Although Baggott is not included in this collection, these poets speak of the same topics that interest all women poets—women's stories and women's survival as poets.

Prins, Yopie, and Maeera Shreiber, eds., *Dwelling in Possibility: Women Poets and Critics on Poetry*, Cornell University Press, 1998.

This book is a collection of feminist critical essays that have been interwoven with poetry. The book includes the work of female poets and feminist literary critics, who explore new ways to write and think about poetry.

Rankine, Claudia, ed., *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, Wesleyan University Press, 2002.

This book presents a collection of ten contemporary American women poets and focuses on the issue of whether gender influences the work of female poets.

Rees-Jones, Deryn, *Consorting with Angels*, Bloodaxe Books, 2001.

In this collection of critical essays, Rees-Jones examines that different ways that twentieth-century female poets have tried to create feminist poems within a cultural and societal framework that confines what female poets can write.

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Rakoff, Joanna Smith, “Celebrating the Joys of Poetry,” in *Book Page*, April 2001, http://www.bookpage.com/0104bp/nonfiction/poetry_roundup.html (accessed December 11, 2006).

Wickett, Dan, “Review of *This Country of Mothers*,” in *Emerging Writers Forum*, August 27, 2002, http://www.breaktech.net/emergingwritersforum/View_Review.aspx?id=197 (accessed December 11, 2006).

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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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