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Reader's Guide

from Kathleen Ossip
 author of *The Do-Over*

Author Asks:

1. The story of A.'s dying and death is the heart of *The Do-Over* and it colors the speaker's (my) reaction to everything she (I) encounter(s). How do the A. poems work together to achieve this narrative and how does the tone and language of the other poems reflect the speaker's ongoing experience of grief and loss?
2. The dedication of this book is very clear: It was written for the woman who was my stepmother-in-law (translation: my husband's father's second wife). Does knowing that A. was a real person and her death a real death affect your experience of the book? How?
3. As soon as Anne Sexton finished writing her poem "Music Swims Back to Me," she called her pal Maxine Kumin, read it to her, and asked "Is this a poem?" When I wrote my poem "Lyric," which closes the first section of *The Do-Over*, I wanted to ask the same question. What would you answer and why?
4. Another piece which clearly isn't a poem is the short story "After" in section 4. I felt I needed to explore the afterlife after A. dies in section 3, and I wanted the afterlife to be real in the world of the book, not speculative as it might seem in a poem. What's the effect of this sudden shift in genre, from poetry to fiction?
5. Every so often I meet a poet who says, one way or another, that rhyming poetry is dead. However, I use rhyme in several poems in *The Do-Over*. Do you think contemporary poems can use rhyme successfully?
6. "No use" is a prose poem that started out trying to be an essay. I discovered the letter by Aurelia Plath in the Lilly Library in Indiana, where a Sylvia Plath archive is maintained. I had not seen this letter mentioned in any of the Plath biographies (and believe me, I've read them all) and I wanted to put it into public awareness in the form of an essay, but I was only able to manage this poem-like thing. How does the content of the letter, as it's described in poem, resonate with the rest of the book (and add to your understanding of the Plath myth)?
7. I found myself using the imagery of plants throughout the book, something I resisted at first because of its conventionality, but then embraced because of its elemental quality. It's hard not to see the life cycle of plants (life, death, rebirth—so quick!) in our close experiences with death. How do you see plant imagery working in the book?
8. Famous names are liberally sprinkled throughout *The Do-Over*. What is your reaction to them? What do they add to the book?
9. "A. in September" is a special poem for me and the last poem I wrote for this book. In it, I aimed to be as direct and clear as I possibly could be. What I felt I was risking was being sentimental. Sentimentality can be defined as the use of stale methods, subject matter, and language to evoke emotion in a reader. How does this poem, and this book, avoid or collide with the sentimental?

10. The closing poem “Oh, wow, mausoleums,” although based on a real experience driving through Brooklyn, was also my attempt at updating Emily Dickinson’s “Because I could not stop for Death.” How do you see that influence working in the poem?

Writing Exercises:

Last Words

As I hinted above, one of the challenges I gave myself with this book was to be as direct and clear as I could (which may not be all that direct and clear). I wanted to try and “say” exactly what I “meant.” This quality of urgency is something I value in poetry. So...

Imagine that this is your last day on earth. Freewrite for 15-20 minutes on each of the following topics:

1. Think of someone who means a lot to you, someone you’re intimate with—a child, a parent, a partner, a dear friend. Write what you would urgently want to say to him or her.
2. Your last words will be printed on the front page of the New York Times. Write what you would urgently want to tell the world.

Now make two separate poems from the freewrites.

Further Reading:

John Berryman, *The Dream Songs*: for its unruliness
Fleetwood Mac, *Tusk*: for its ranginess
Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*: for its intensity mixed with pop sensibility
Jennifer Moxley, *Clampdown*: for its precision of thought
David Trinidad, *Phoebe 2002*: for its inclusiveness
Emily Dickinson: for her commitment to her reality, no matter how strange it sounds
Botticelli, *Primavera*: for its commitment to pleasure
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*: for the acrostic poem at the end

