

READING COMPANION

The Wishing Tomb, by Amanda Auchter

Sample poem:

Letter to Comte de Ponchartrain

December, 1697

The question is water, how to shadow

this slow tongue that collects

in hill and dale, wild cattle. To build
a city made of birds, cotton, rain-

lit houses. How to harvest
and fell

white mulberry, copper, the buffalo
air. Imagine a country risen

from ship timber, Indian corn. The windows

and their hemp sashes. Here,

it is easy to remain still and sweat
at midnight, your body a seething

sea. Everywhere
it is dark: loose leaves,

forest. The water
arrives exhausted, climbs

the lowlands and marshweed. We will want

to close its wide mouth, bring boats

stacked with cables, ropes,
masts. We could conjure

a city from fruit blossom, magnolia,
thunderheads. This world is in me:

let us build ourselves again

from silt, salt. Let the water
rise and wash

through the streets. Let the wind
fill each breath, each dry throat.

Questions to consider:

1. Consider the image in the title, *The Wishing Tomb*. How does the meaning of this image and title change and develop throughout the collection?
2. How does the image and symbol of water appear and change throughout the collection? Consider poems such as "Report on the Levee Breach, 1816" and "The Good Friday Flood, 1927."

3. The City of New Orleans appears in this collection not only as a place, but also as a persona, a living being. What effect does this have on the reader? Consider poems such as "The Disordered Body." What places in your life have a persona? Describe them.
4. Find at least three poems where Auchter uses imagery of transformation. Why do you think this theme recurs in this collection?
5. Many of these poems are told from the point of view of historical figures in New Orleans. What effect does it have to tell these poems from their perspectives?
6. Auchter juxtaposes beauty, celebration, and ruin in many of these poems. Why do you think she chooses this, and what effect does this have? How does it complicate the reader's perception of New Orleans? Consider the poems "Why New Orleans," "Jazz Funeral," and "Marie Laveau, Postmortem."
7. How does Auchter use snapshots of images and historical moments to compile a collage of a vast city over centuries? Why do you think she chooses this technique in this collection? Consider "Gray Line Katrina Tours" and "The Heel String Gang."
8. What are some of the repeated images and words that let the reader know where these poems are taking place? Consider "6220 Camp Street," "The Wishing Tomb," and "Testimony of Evangeline the Oyster Girl, 1948." How does the attention to place create meaning in this collection?

Writing prompts:

1. Write a poem from one historical figure to another, such as "Letter to Comte de Pontchartrain."
2. Begin a poem with this line from "Testimony of Baroness de Pontalba, 1834":
"How animal I am in my desire."

3. Write a poem starting with an historic photograph, as Auchter does in “Holt Cemetery.”
4. Use lines from news articles to create a found poem, as Auchter does in “Fragments of an Aftermath.”

Other Perugia books that could pair with this collection:

Kettle Bottom, Diane Gilliam

Each Crumbling House, Melody S. Gee

Sweet Husk, Corrie Williamson

Areas of study in which to teach this title:

American Studies

Creative Writing/Poetry

U.S. History

Ethnic & Gender Studies

Women’s Studies

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