

2018 One Book One Nebraska Discussion Questions

“Nebraska Presence: An Anthology of Poetry”

Lucy Adkins

Discussion Questions in regards to my poem “On the Pleasant Valley Road” (and two others):

1. What do you think it was like living in Nebraska during the wartimes of World Wars I and II? Do any of your older family members or friends speak of this? For those Nebraskans, on the “home front,” what elements of pride and anguish and despair were endured?
2. In addition to “On the Pleasant Valley Road,” other poems dealing with war are Bruce Koborg’s “Army of One” and Ernst Niemann’s “Refusal to Apologize for the Way Things Are.” What similarities do you see among the three poets? What differences? War is a daunting subject to tackle. How do the poets go about this in their different works?

General Discussion Questions in regards to *Nebraska Presence*:

1. Many readers enjoy books and poems with a strong sense of place. How do you see this in Clif Mason’s “Big Muddy,” Neil Harrison’s “Naming the Lakes,” Therese Svoboda’s “Sale Barn,” and Mary Kay Stillwell’s “Red Barn”?
2. At one time or another in our lives, we may feel a disconnect, that we are somehow “outsiders.” Consider this in Greg Kuzma’s “Sometimes” and “When We Dead Awake,” and Greg Kosmicki’s “Windows.”
3. Poems come from an individual “place” in an individual person. But they do so in the context of history, geography, and the current culture of the poet. In regards to history and those who went lived here before us, look at “Dakota, 1933” by J V Brummels, Lorraine Duggin’s “Steamer Trunk” and John McKernan’s “Walking Along the Missouri River North of Omaha I Find an Indian Arrowhead.” What different times and elements of history are discussed? What would you say is the “mood” of each poem?
4. Again, accepting the premise that poems come from an individual “place” in an individual person, but is written in the context of history, geography, and the culture of the poet, consider how the land and landscape (geography, if you will) appear in some poems. Look at “Funeral at Ansley” by Don Welch, Stephen Behrendt’s two “hawk” poems, and “We Are On Nine Mile Prairie When” by Twyla Hansen. What features of the landscape or geography appear? In each instance, how does the individual poet intersect with his or her surroundings?

5. Nebraska as a place is directly addressed in Ted Kooser's "So, This is Nebraska," Kelly Madigan (Erlandson's) "Nebraska," and Don Welch's "Nebraska." Which portions of these poems ring especially true for you? What word pictures are created?
 6. Nebraska is a state with strong rural roots. How do you see this in Amy Knox Brown's "Old Wives Tales," Pat Hemphill Emile's "Killings" and Ron Block's "Shame"? Are there any of these you particularly connect with? Why?
 7. Writers are keen observers of many things, including others around them. Read Ted Kooser's "At the Cancer Clinic," Bill Kloefkorn's "My Love for All Things Warm and Breathing," Mary Kay Stillwell's "The Circle Dance" and Marge Saiser's "Night Flight." Do you see common characteristics in these poems? What is the "tone" of each poem?
 8. Over and over in the anthology, we come across references to birds. Why do you think this is so? Read Tom Gannon's "bird" poems, Art Homer's "Turkey Vultures," and Amy Plettner's "Morning." What are the individual birds in each? How do they serve each poem?
 9. Do you think that living in a place like Nebraska—with expansive vistas and big skies affects us as individuals? How? Is this changing?
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Susan Aizenberg

1. "Debut: Late Lines for a Thirtieth Birthday": Narrative poems (like this one) often do the same "work" short stories do, but in a highly compressed fashion. How does this poem seem like or unlike a short story? How is the experience of reading it similar or different and why?
 2. "Things That Cannot Be Compared": The ending of this poem might be understood in various ways. Discuss what it seems to you to mean: do your best to use the imagery, metaphor, and details of the poem to support your interpretation.
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Ron Block

1. Both poems record a sense of embarrassment or shame. In each poem, what is the source of these feelings? What happens to these feelings when they are expressed in a poem?

2. “Strip Joint” is recorded in the voice of the father. How would it be different if it were recorded in the voice of the son?
 3. In “Shame” the poet hears a story about his mother that he never heard before. What are the stories about your parents or grandparents (or siblings, aunts, uncles, or cousins) that changed how you saw them? How did these stories change your perspective?
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Amy Knox Brown

1. My poem “Old Wives’ Tales” begins with a phrase I’d often heard my mother use. She has several of these phrases—“Taking the long way around Robin Hood’s barn”; “I’ll trade you for a yellow dog and shoot the yellow dog”; “I haven’t thought of that since Hector was a pup”—that have echoed in my head over the years. When I observed the situation that inspired the poem—someone who’d told me he was having an affair was out in public with his lover, and it was pretty obvious they were involved—my mother’s phrase “Don’t get your tit caught in the wringer” came instantly to mind. So, what are some phrases you remember from your own family? Do they bring to mind any particular events or stories?
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Michael Catherwood

“Army of One” Bruce Koborg

1. Who is the third person “you” in the poem?
2. Does this function as a protest poem?
3. What details used in the poem are surprising?

“The Cement Evangelical Worship Center” Michael Catherwood

1. How does the tone in the poem function with the subject?
2. What does this poem have to say about faith?
3. How are images in the poem organized?
4. What is the relationship of “rust” and “blood” in the poem?

“At the North Edge of Town” Roy Scheele

5. How is the idea of mythology explored in the poem's imagery?
 6. How are the images of leaves used in the poem?
 7. How does the speaker raise larger questions in the poem?
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Shelly Clark Geiser

Poems: *My Daughter Picking Mulberries* and *The Zen of Goats*

1. In the poem, "My Daughter Picking Mulberries" (page 53) the speaker of the poem juxtaposes a scene from her daughter's childhood with the experience of watching her teenage daughter leave with friends. What is the subject matter of this poem? Is imagery used to bring meaning to the poem? If so, how? What range of emotions is the mother feeling? Are the daughter's emotions implied? If so, what do you think she might be feeling? How would you describe the tone of the poem? Does the poem evoke a universal theme?
 2. In "The Zen of Goats", (pages 53-54), the narrator describes the experience of watching goats at a county fair. Besides goats, what else is the poem about? How do the beginning stanzas and last stanza differ in tone and subject matter from the rest of the poem? Can you find other poems in the anthology that address a similar overall theme?
 3. Of the two poems, "My Daughter Picking Mulberries" and "Zen of Goats" which poem "spoke" to you more? Why?
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Marilyn Coffey

"Pricksong" questions:

1. Is the speaker in this poem serious? Or speaking tongue-in-cheek?
2. When the speaker says that the penis "flies around the house/and sings at me," what song do you think it might be singing?
3. What do you think the speaker used "to shoot it down": a gun? a bow and arrow?

4. The last few lines starting with “I am afraid” are shorter than earlier lines. Why is that?
 5. Why, at the end, does the penis cry?
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Lorraine Duggin

1. Many immigrants to Nebraska arrived with little in the way of material goods, but although our current culture acknowledges the importance of stories, many also did not share their stories, sometimes due to language barriers. What other reasons might our forebears have had for not telling their stories? (“Steamer Trunk”)
2. Reading these poems by Nebraskans, one notes the recurrent themes and attitudes of hardship, stoicism and sheer grit aimed toward self-sufficiency and survival. Can evidence or remnants be found of these traits in today’s culture? Why or why not? If so, where? Be specific.
(“Any Particular Joy,” “Modern Clothing” and many others.)
3. The outdoor environment and a kinship with nature and/or wildlife are inherent in many of these poems. How can this connection to the land be developed and cultivated in future generations and/or in our growing urban society in a way that will encourage environmental preservation? Can the reading and writing of poetry do this for us? How? Discuss this question in the context of specific poems.
4. One theory about wide-open spaces like those found in the western part of the state of Nebraska, but perhaps even in the few cities which include plenty of green space, is that this environment fosters greater creativity in individuals. The absence of abundantly dramatic geographical features like mountains, seacoasts, and oceans allows the human imagination free reign to explore possibilities, so the theory goes. Is there support for this idea in any of the poems in Nebraska Presence? Would you say that Midwestern poets and writers have more advantages or disadvantages compared to poets in other geographical regions of the country or of the world? Give examples.
5. Nebraska has a proud literary heritage, but as generations pass, how can authors like Cather, Neihardt, Kees, Sandoz, and others be kept relevant to youth who may be more engrossed in a digital world? In what ways are the authors in Nebraska Presence reminiscent of previous authors? Do you see any connections? What are universal Nebraskan themes? Can younger generations find meaning in the poems collected here? Give examples. Could these authors in any way provide a connection between youth and the work of earlier authors? How?

6. Nebraska is a diverse state in terms of landscape, politics, class structures, ethnic origins of its people, and in many other ways. What types of diversity among the collected authors do you find, or is there a relative sameness in terms of experiences and vital concerns? What does having the landscape in common do for blending diversity and heterogeneity into community and connection, if anything? Elaborate on your response.
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Rebecca Faber

1. “My Sister”: How connected do we feel here on the Plains with national events and decisions? Are there any aspects of this geographic space that might make us feel pessimistic?
 2. “The Fisherman’s Wife”: In a country as large as ours, what stereotypes might we have about other sections of the United States? What stereotypes might people in other sections of the country have about Nebraskans?
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Twyla Hansen

1. What makes a poem a poem and not a work of prose?
2. Are there common themes running through these poems (if any)?
3. Does storytelling have a place in these poems? Is it important? If so, why?
4. What makes a poem about place universal? Does that matter?
5. What forms do these poems use?
6. Does form enhance or detract from appreciation of the poems?
7. Is clarity important in poems? If so, why?
8. Is it important for the reader to understand a poem in order to appreciate it?

9. Do any these poems make use the senses—sight, smell, sound, taste, touch? Is that important? If so, why?

10. Are there examples of allusion in these poems?

Neil Harrison

1. Why do memories connected with the waters we have known tend to haunt us?

Steve Langan

1. Stephen Mitchell, translator of the poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, said Rilke was able to "praise and lament" at the same time, in the same poem. Where do you see evidence of poets in the anthology praising and lamenting...or doing some form of complex emotional work?

Clif Mason

1. What are the different views of nature, and of rivers in particular, in John KcKernan's "Walking Along the Missouri River North of Omaha I Find an Indian Arrowhead," Roy Scheele's "At the North Edge of Town," and Clif Mason's "Big Muddy"?

Charlene Neely

She considers the poem "Unraveling" which is included in Nebraska Presence an allegory for re-inventing one's life.

Terrance Oberst

His submission to Nebraska Presence, "Death and Company," was a Plainsongs Award Poem in Vol.12, #2. The question he would ask is:

1. What is it that makes "Death and Company" such a unique poem amidst practically all the other poems in the Nebraska Presence Anthology?
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Jan Pettit

1. The wide-open, windy landscape of my childhood has written itself into almost everything I put on paper. That seems true for many of the writers in this anthology. In fact, how many pieces in the book do not revolve around landscape and memory? Today, far fewer kids have the opportunity (if you call it that) to grow up in such a place. I can't help but feel that the loss of a landscape is a cultural loss, and a loss to literature. Is this really true, or is this just nostalgic sentimentality speaking?
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Amy Plettner

The questions pertaining to my poems focus on the human life cycle, aging, the dying process, and transformation of the spirit.

1. Do the intimate relationships of our past bring us closer to the present?
 2. When someone you love dies how do you carry on the meaning of their life in your own?
 3. Do you believe in intentionally making a decision to take your own life by not eating or drinking? Would you honor a loved ones decision to end their life this way? How do you honor loss and life?
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Marjorie Saiser

1. In the poem "Paradise on the Niobrara" (page 130), two siblings grow up in the same household, but as often happens, they have different memories/feelings about their experiences. What are some differences that the poem points out? Can you think of other instances in real life where two people have different memories of the same event?
2. In "My Father Argued with My Mother" (page 129), we get a sense of what it seemed like for the child when her parents argued or gave one another the silent treatment. What did the child do to escape from unhappiness? To the child, the wind seemed to be saying certain phrases. Think of some possible reasons that the child imagined the wind to promise "Never again" or "Always, always." The child imagined the sleet to touch the window gently. How could the sleet stand in for some gentleness the child hopes for?

3. In the poem "Night Flight"(page 129), the narrator describes the interior of an airplane in flight and thinks of the people on board as a community. At the end of the poem, the passengers have been served refreshments. According to the poem, how does this resemble a communion? In the middle of the poem, the narrator is thinking of a famous play, "Our Town," in which ghosts are sitting on chairs arranged in rows on stage sort of like the seats are arranged on an airplane, everyone facing ahead. For those not familiar with this play, the middle of the poem could be puzzling. Think of a movie you've seen that might be a more familiar reference to you than the play "Our Town."
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Terry Schiffrerns

"When They Go"

1. What do the narrator of the poem and Thelma have in common?
 2. Do you think dogs feel remorse or regret?
 3. And what would Thelma feel remorse or regret about?
 4. What would the theme of this poem be?
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Barbara Schmitz

"Supper"

You might think about a particular "supper" you've shared with family and/or friends. What did you serve? What else was going on that day that added to or detached from the meal? Who was there? Where are all the actors in the scene now? My 38 year old son says he remembers "those green noodles". Our fence has needed many repairs over the years. How has the movie of your life gone?

"How to Get to Plattsmouth"

Can you think of landmarks in your home town. (For me it was the Platte and Missouri meeting, the oak-covered hills of Plattsmouth). What's a potent memory from your home town? My brother says I was too young to remember President Truman but I can still see him standing there on the caboose as I can still see the flood water at the end of Main Street. Were there natural disasters in your home town? How about unique facts? ('more bars per capita')? Where did the youth gather? (A & W Root Beer Stand?) Do you have relatives buried there?

James Solheim

1. What is the relationship between real and imagined culture in some of the poems in the book? For example, is a poem about Nebraska's Czech immigrant culture (Lorraine Duggin's "Steamer Trunk") about a completely real experience, while a rural character who claims he has been visited regularly by extraterrestrials (James Solheim's poem on page 141) about an entirely imagined world? Or might poems often be somewhere between, with the poet imagining whatever reality makes the poem better—mixing the real world with imagination's spaces?
 2. Why are the lines of "Blessed by Meteors and by the Benevolent Men of Space" (page 141) right justified when almost every other poem's are left justified? Is there even an answer to this question, or are reasons in poetry usually too complex for explanation, like the reasons e e cummings wrote in lower-case letters or Emily Dickinson used so many dashes?
 3. In James Solheim's "Blessed by Meteors and by the Benevolent Men of Space," has the narrator really been visited by extraterrestrials, or is he imagining or making up their visits?
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Judith Sornberger

1. Several poems in this anthology allude to, and (some) use language from other sources. John Brehm's poem "Sea of Faith" alludes to a poem, Marge Saiser's "Night Flight" alludes to a play and Grace Bauer's poem "On Finding a Footnote to "Truckin'" and Judith Sornberger's poem "Wallpapering to Patsy Cline" allude to songs. In each poem, how does bringing in words or images from another work (a poem, play or song) enrich or deepen the poem's impact? What are the ways that different poets bring other written works into their poems? What does the use of such allusions suggest about the ways that poets are influenced and nourished by the work of other writers?
2. The title of "Our Lady of the Rest Stop," by Judith Sornberger, suggests that the poem's speaker sees a woman at a rest stop as the biblical Mary. Nevertheless, the poem's setting is quite ordinary—a rest stop—and particular—Hyannis, Nebraska. There are many stories of Mary appearing to people in various parts of the world. What details in the poem suggest that the woman is like (or *is*) Mary? What details ground the poem in ordinary reality? Is it possible to reconcile two views of her—as both Mary and an ordinary woman? Is it possible for an ordinary woman to affect those around her in the ways this woman does?

Mary K. Stillwell

1. “The Circle Dance” suggests that some emotions and events are universal and can be healed through ritual? What is the story she tells? What does she come to understand during the course of the poem?
 2. Some poems, like Stillwell’s “Red Barn” are bittersweet reflections on the changes within the family. How does the red barn signify what has been lost? And perhaps gained?
 3. The subject of family relationships comes up in a number of poems in the anthology, for example, in Bauer’s “Modern Clothing,” Zydek’s “Father Dancing” and “Mother at the Piano,” Clark Geisler’s “My Daughter Picking Mulberries,” and Banker’s “Bed Fellows,” to name a few. How do the stories or events they refer to have lasting importance for the poets or how have they become a symbol for the poet’s experience of that person?
 4. What do you make of Ron Block’s poem, “Strip Joint,” being in quotes?
 5. What part does the Nebraska landscape play in the poems set in our state? Which poems speak to the landscape you are familiar with? What do they say about the place we call home?
 6. Birds show up as an apparent subject in a number of poems in the anthology, for example, Behrendt’s “Hawk Shadow, Early May” and “The November Hawk,” Gannon’s “Bird Poem” and “Bird Poem II.” Compare and contrast how each of these pairs work. What feelings do they generate?
 7. How have the lives of Nebraska women have changed—and remained the same-- from one generation to the next, for example, in Brown’s “Old Wives Tales,” West’s “Progression, and Buettner’s “Neighbor?” Are there any other examples that spoke to you? Which ones? How?
 8. What do Adkin’s “On the Pleasant Valley Road,” Hansen’s “We Are on Nine-Mile Prairie When,” and Brummel’s “Dakota, 1933” have in common? What larger issues do they raise?
 9. Is religion important to these Nebraska writers? Which poems tell you so? How?
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Terese Svoboda

1. I secretly wrote fairytales in 4th grade in Ogallala. Since then, I've published 17 books of fiction, poetry, memoir, translation and biography in NYC most recently Professor Harriman's "Steam Air-Ship (Eyewear)" and "Anything That Burns You: A Portrait of Lola Ridge, Radical Poet."
 2. How has the attitude toward the selling of animals changed over the last half century?
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Jon Volkmer

1. The grain elevator can be an infernal, even apocalyptic, place, so it is not surprising to see Biblical references in Jon's poems. The prelapsarian setting is obvious for "Cosmology," but can you find the two Bible references in "Fumigant" and their connection to the theme?
 2. "Cosmology" is written in common meter, paying homage to countless prayers, hymns and ditties, not to mention Emily Dickinson. This means it can be sung to dozens of familiar tunes, from "Good King Wenceslas" to the "Theme from Gilligan's Island" to "Yellow Rose of Texas." Try it! What other Christmas carols and popular songs can you come up with to fit that rhythm?
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Lynn Wake

1. As I read through *Nebraska Presence* again, a comment from Greg Kosmicki on page 18 in the Introduction catches my attention. Greg writes that poems included in the anthology did not have to be "Nebraska-themed or rural-themed... but we still got a few poems about farm animals and barns." So Greg has me wondering about the presence (or maybe lack of presence?) of non-human animals in the book.
2. And Mary K Stillwell, also writing in the introduction, mentions birds, associating birds with the theme of loss: "Nebraska's native prairie is mostly gone, the rivers have been diverted, the birds and other wildlife diminished" (23). The birds in NP are definitely worth looking for; what themes, besides loss, do they suggest to you? What is your experience reading Tom Gannon's two bird poems, p.68 and 69; what effect do these poems create for you? Is reading "The Old Crow" by Cliff Mason, p.99, a different sort

of experience? Do those two poets treat their avian subjects in a different manner from Ted Kooser's Great Blue Heron in "Etude," p.83?

3. If you read through *Nebraska Presence* with the intention of noticing animals, what do you find? Cows? Anything besides farm animals and birds?
 4. What does Hilda Raz suggest about pets? Her poem "Pets" is on page 122.
 5. How does Rex Walton expand the idea of a pet cat's disappearance in "When She Does Not Come Home" p.156?
 6. How does Walton's poem differ from "When They Go" by Terry Lee Schiffers, p.135?
 7. One poem with an especially strong presence of animals is Don Welch's "The Keeper of Miniature Deer," p. 160. Would you say this poem lives up to Emily Dickenson's criteria for a poem, i.e., to "take the top of your head off"—as Greg references on page 18? What happens if you read "The Keeper of Miniature Deer" paired with Jon Volkmer's "Cosmology" on p. 150?
 8. *Nebraska Presence* offers a startling range of attitudes toward animals, from Steve Langan's "There goes a rat, past a fresh puddle of drool," p.92, to Don Welch's lyrical eulogy with "catbirds and kingbirds / and cottonwoods, and the gray-green / leaves of the buffalo grass" (159). There are poems with the slightest glances at non-human animals and poems that feature animals' center stage. There are extended metaphors and there are intricate observations. What is your experience as a reader as you search for the presence of animals in the poems of *Nebraska Presence*?
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Elizabeth Clark Wessel

"Asylum"

1. This poem describes the Apathetic Child Syndrome, which researchers believe is brought on by the stress of awaiting deportation. Try to imagine what it would be like if you and your family had to leave your home tomorrow. What would you miss most? What are the things that make your home special to you?
2. On April 3, 2017 a long article appeared in the *New Yorker*, which profiled the lives of some of these children. Read this article and then write a letter in the voice of one of these children explaining to the rest of us why you've stopped speaking and moving.

3. Read an article about a situation in the world that makes you feel sad or upset. Put those feelings into a poem.
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Jan Chism Wright

1. Have there been instances in your life when you have felt the acute dichotomy of the outside world versus your everyday world?
 2. Have you ever felt or experienced examples of how where you lived colored your view of the world?
 3. I found this dichotomy so surprising and much more acute after moving from the big city of Houston to the country. I wonder, would I have written this poem if I had been living in Houston at the time?
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Rosemary Zumpfe

1. The format of a poem on the page and the space between lines are an integral aspect of a poem's expression. In Steve Langan's "Notes on Landscape," how is tension and intensity created by the extra spacing between lines? How does this contrast with the tension and intensity created by lines compressed into one stanza in "Death's Door" by Mark Sanders? How do these compare with the effect of the format in "Thousands at His Bidding Post" by Don Jones?
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