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Aard-vark to Axolotl

By Karen Donovan

A Study Guide for Students

Synopsis

Karen Donovan's *Aard-vark to Axolotl*, an eclectic series of tiny stories and prose poems, is based on a set of illustrations from the pages of her grandfather's 1925 *Webster's New International Dictionary*. The author collected pictures of plants and animals, diagrams and devices, and dozens of other charmingly quirky objects and created a new narrative context for each one. Sometimes sneaky mysterious, sometimes downright weird, these small poetic stories work on the reader like alternative definitions for items drawn from a cabinet of curiosities.

Author Bio

Karen Donovan is the author of two collections of poetry, *Fugitive Red* (University of Massachusetts Press), which won the Juniper Prize, and *Your Enzymes Are Calling the Ancients* (Persea Books), winner of the Lexi Rudnitsky/Editor's Choice Award. From 1985 to 2005 she co-edited ¶: A *Magazine of Paragraphs*, a journal of short prose published by Oat City Press. She lives in East Providence, Rhode Island.

Study Questions

1. What was your initial reaction to the title *Aard-vark to Axolotl*? What image does it evoke? Did your impression of the title change as you read the book?
2. In "Earth Pig," Donovan tells the reader "You are going to have to dig. Go to it. The book is open." Did you find yourself "digging," as you read the book? What did you find?
3. In "Fire, Inc." Donovan tells us, "Words, words were what I needed." What does this book say about the importance and power of language? How does it illustrate the need for language?
4. How does "Yum" illustrate the mutability of language? What are the factors that come into play when determining the definition of a word according to this book?
5. What does "Mesozoic" tell us about vulnerability? How does this play out over the rest of the book?
6. How does "Unclear on the instructions" shape your understanding of human interaction?
7. Trace the water and wind imagery throughout the book. What is the significance of these recurring images?

8. In "Late night with vampires," Donovan tells us she "felt the fangs of the past, present, and future sink evermore securely into my neck." What argument do you think she is making about time in this book?

9. What is the significance of the sequence of images in "Other floral borders I have known"?

10. How does this book explore the themes of possession and belonging?

11. How do the concepts of conformity and resistance play out in "A fortune"? Do you see echoes of this in the rest of the book?

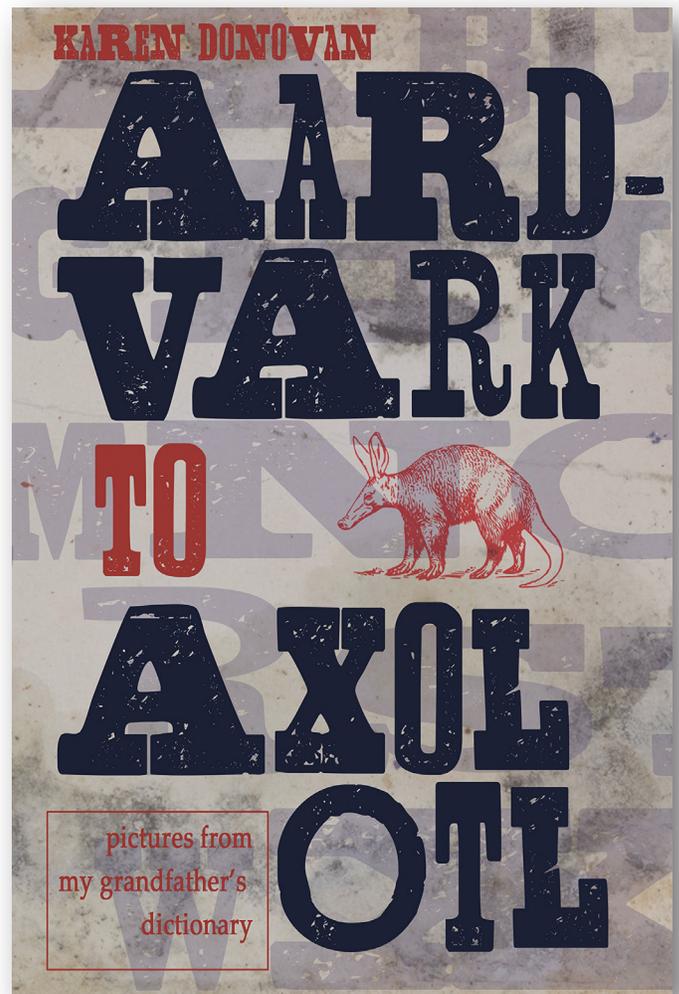
12. Examine the role of the images and the text in these pieces. How do they interact with each other? How do they interact with the reader? How does their juxtaposition with each other impact how they are perceived?

13. How is the theme of extinction developed throughout the book?

14. How does this book explore the relationship between the human world and the natural world?

15. Analyze the use of form in this book.

16. Re-read the book in the order of the two indices at the back. How does the change in order impact your experience as a reader?



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