



Bestiality of the Involved

By Spring Ulmer

A Study Guide

Synopsis

Spring Ulmer takes, as a starting point for this essay collection, Theodor Adorno's accusation that a life "purely as a fact will strangle other life." As she throws herself this way and that in her search for love and meaning, Ulmer refuses to shirk her own complicity in the terror and suffering of the present era. How, Ulmer asks, does one render the real, and what is the relationship between art and activism? On an odyssey to become a mother, she doggedly surveys what it means not only to create, but also to mother in this day and age. In this self-portrait as seen through disparate encounters, Ulmer talks with respective neighbors, including a hunter in the Vermont woods, a Rwandan ex-soldier online, an immigrant in a subway car, cadets at a military school, a stranger at an airport—and invites us along as she works as a farmhand, secretary, and professor. Waylaid by tragedy, Ulmer questions how we might move beyond Adornoian guilt into another ethical paradigm—one that cultivates emotional intelligence. The impulse to see and what it means to lay claim to anyone or anything is troubled water—marred by the stirring up of social memory and the brutal human imprint on the natural world, yet Ulmer learns, after the death of her father, that a returned gaze portends the joining of souls she has just eschewed. A life, Ulmer intimates, can also honor other life.

Author Bio

Spring Ulmer is the author of *Benjamin's Spectacles* and *The Age of Virtual Reproduction*. She teaches at Middlebury College. In addition to academic teaching, she has worked as a journalist and photojournalist, taught writing and photography workshops at the University of Technology and Management in Lahore, Pakistan, and with migrant children, juvenile detainees, homeless youth, and refugees in the United States.

Reasons to Include This Book in the Classroom

Bestiality of the Involved freely borrows from art and reality, plumbing the depths of perspective to interrogate culture. The book does not shy away from society's tough topics, such as privilege, race, and genocide, and as a result compels the reader to look at the world anew.

Study Questions and Writing Prompts

Content

1. Throughout this collection of essays, Ulmer writes at length about art and literature. How do different works of art and literature influence her experiences as depicted in these essays?
2. Ulmer writes, "Realism shows us, as it mirrors our mortality, what beasts we are." What is it about realist art that makes her come to this conclusion?
3. What are the internal battles that Ulmer faces, and how do these battles influence how she views the world?
4. Ulmer writes extensively about violence, genocide, and war overseas, while also referencing historic events. How would you describe the tone when she mentions these issues? What does this say about what she might believe?

Writing Prompt: In *Bestiality of the Involved* Ulmer examines life through the lens of art and literature. Select a work of art or literature and write 500 words explaining how this work intersects with your life.

Digging Deeper

1. How does race impact Ulmer's attempts to adopt a child?
2. What is the significance of the essay "A Short History of Labor?" What do we learn about Ulmer in this essay? Does this essay complicate the book's overall resolution?
3. In the last line of the book, Ulmer uses the word "dumbfounded" to describe the moment she shares with her son. Why do you think she chose this word?
4. Define the term "bestiality" and discuss why this book was titled *Bestiality of the Involved*.

Writing Prompt: Think about a controversial event that has happened in your life or history, and write an account of the event from the opposing perspective in 500 words.

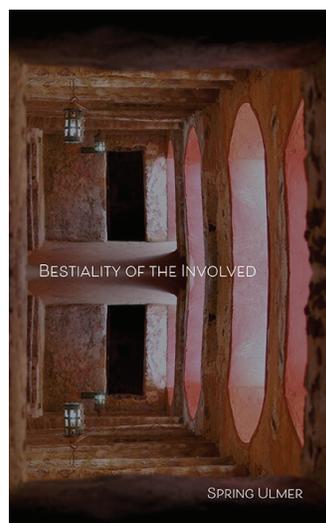
Overall Thoughts

1. How might a shift in perspective influence how we view today's racial tension?
2. In "A Short History of the White Gaze" Ulmer writes, "And I still hope beyond hope that I can find the loop-hole, the right way to be white, the right way to become a parent, and the right way to raise a child." What would you consider to be the right way to be white, and the right way to parent and raise a child?
3. In what way does race play a role in how parents raise their children?
4. What are practical ways we could try to mend the divide, and bestiality, between and within countries around the world?

Writing Prompt: Write 500 words about a time you helped a stranger. What did you do? Did it really help? Include detailed descriptions of how both you and the stranger reacted.

Standards for the English Language Arts (as compiled by NCTE and IRA)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
5. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
6. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
7. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.



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84 West South Street
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18766
P: 570.408.4546
www.etruscanpress.org
books@etruscanpress.org