



etruscan press

Dear Z: The Zygote Epistles

By Diane Raptosh

A Study Guide

Synopsis

Written by an aunt to her potential niece, the letters in *Dear Z: The Zygote Epistles* introduce the “Z” to the wildly vexed work of taking on—and hanging onto—selfhood. Shape-shifting from love poems to prose poems, musical spells to logic equations, monostiches to math symbols, these letters meditate on self and world—specifically, what personhood, identity and community membership might entail in a perilous age. With these epistles’ “epi-pen,” the speaker takes her zygote-niece on a virtual tour of the checkered landscape that is 21st-century America, where *Alphabet* now is a firm on the Nasdaq, prisons harvest children for profit, and the architectures of authentic personhood are almost always under siege. In the spirit of serious play, *Dear Z*’s narrative arc bends toward hope as some of the poems test out rap and Old English, while others yearn toward blues, rock, and animal-sound. The book casts a wide net of wonderings about self and other, mind and marketplace, language and consciousness: “Is language anguish gauge or laughing gas? / Correct answer: *yes*,” suggests the speaker. Some of the poems take solace in the South Sea Islander from *Moby-Dick*: the character Queequeg, who, traveling through time, implies through his tattooed runes that he wants us all to serve as *real-time person assisters*. In *Dear Z*, we are summoned to ask *What is one i?*, while at the same time we are called to see all citizens as members of “my group”—the pain of others, our severest strand of anguish.

Author Bio

Diane Raptosh’s fourth book of poetry, *American Amnesiac*, (Etruscan Press) was longlisted for the 2013 National Book Award and was a finalist for the Housatonic Book Award. The recipient of three fellowships in literature from the Idaho Commission on the Arts, she served as the Boise Poet Laureate (2013) as well as the Idaho Writer-in-Residence (2013-2016), the highest literary honor in the state. In 2018 she received the Idaho Governor’s Arts Award in Excellence. A highly active ambassador for poetry, she has given poetry workshops everywhere from riverbanks to maximum security prisons. She teaches creative writing and runs the program in Criminal Justice/Prison Studies at The College of Idaho. Her most recent collection of poems, *Human Directional*, was released by Etruscan Press in 2016.

Study Questions & Writing Prompts

Knowledge/Comprehension

1. What is an epistle? Why did the author choose this form?
2. Describe the narrative voice of the collection. Whom is the narrator addressing?
3. Choose a poem from *Dear Z* and write an essay about the poet’s use of line, stanza, and form to convey and enact the content, tone, and imagery in the piece.
4. Compare and contrast the structure of three poems as they appear on the page. Why does the author employ different forms for each of these poems?
5. Who was Marie-Marguerite de Youville? What is her significance to the poem? (Page 26)
6. Discuss three examples of the author’s use of wordplay in the collection. How does wordplay affect the tone of the poems you selected?
7. Research the term *Koan*. Explain how it relates to the themes in the collection. (Page 46)
8. Make a list of images threaded through the poems. What do they have in common? Why did the author select them?
9. Define the terms *wanhope* and *inwit*. Use the Oxford English Dictionary to “dig” for five words that are no longer in use. What words do we use for those terms now? (Page 67)
10. Look up the lyrics to the Beatles song, “Blackbird.” Compare and contrast the themes of the song with the themes and imagery of the poem on page 79. Consider how the poem glosses, revises, and/or extends the song’s major motifs.

Application

1. Write a poem to a zygote.
2. Write a poem in epistle form.
3. What is a portmanteau? Make a list of five examples and use one of them to compose a poem. (Page 47)
4. Write a poem using wordplay.
5. Study the poem on page 49 and compose a poem in which you compare, in an extended way, two seemingly unrelated items or images.
6. Find examples of nouns that the author uses as verbs, a poetic technique known as *anthimeria* (referred to by name in the poem on page 64). What effect does this have on the tone and content? Write a poem in which you try using anthimeria— substituting one part of speech for another (e.g. nouns as verbs or verbs as nouns).
7. Create a poem in which the shape reflects, enacts, and/or reinforces the themes or imagery of the poem.
8. Write a series of two-line poems.
9. Look up the lyrics to “Time of the Season” by the band the Zombies. Write a poem that incorporates the lyrics of a song. (Page 59)

Analysis

1. Analyze how the author plays with sound in one of the poems.
2. Why do you think the author chose the prose form for the poem on page 70? Rewrite the poem with line breaks of your choosing. How does this affect the tone and sound of the poem?
3. Is this collection meant to be read aloud? Which pieces lend themselves to the spoken word? Which ones might present difficulty? What effect might purposeful difficulty have on the reading or listening audience?
4. What purpose does the use of mathematical symbols serve in the collection? How does it affect the appearance on the page? How does it affect the tone?
5. What might be a reasoned, sensitive response to the question contained in these lines: How best might anyone / scroll down the straightedge / of love’s paper light— / its welcoming, holy / excruciations? (Page 29)

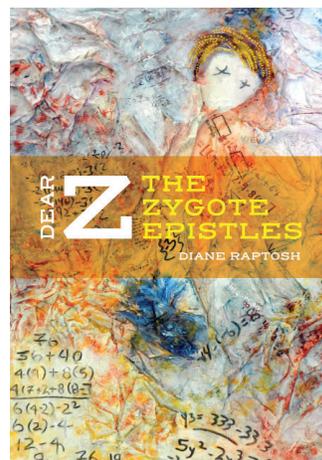
Synthesis

1. Write an essay in which you discuss the narrator’s stance(s) on identity and/or selfhood.
2. What might the narrator mean by the question on page 25, “Is language anguish gauge or laughing gas?” Find examples in our society of language used as “anguish gauge” and as “laughing gas.”
3. Write an essay in which you discuss the author’s stance on the role(s) of gender in 21st-century American society.
4. Research the main characters in *Moby-Dick*. (Ahab, Ishmael, Queequeg, Pip, the whale.) What is their significance in this collection?
5. What do the images in the poem on page 46 have in common? Why are they included in a single poem?

Evaluation

1. What “key habits of Melville’s whole novel” is the narrator trying to teach to Z? (Page 5)
2. What or who does Z seem to represent for the narrator? Support your answer with examples from the text.
3. Choose three poems that reveal the narrator’s stance on three major social issues. How does she address them? Is the genre of poetry an effective means to address social issues? Do the three poems you chose address these issues effectively? How/why or how/why not?

Questions continue on page 3.



etruscan press

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

Evaluation (cont'd)

4. Examine the poem on page 25. What does it reveal about the narrator's sense of the nature of personhood? How might you characterize or define personhood?

5. Examine the lines: the country / swerves its Humvee / across living hope— / the whole place / having moored its fiction-dome / in ire's simplicity. What do they mean to you? How might you define "ire's simplicity?" (Page 50)

6. Examine the lines: Power enacts us into being. To persist / in our persons means we give way to terms / which aim to uproot our own. . . . What is the author saying in these lines? Do you agree or disagree? Provide examples. (Page 27)

7. Why are the final lines of the collection labeled Postscript? How do they reflect, refract or enlarge the themes, tone, and forms of the poems in the collection? (Page 93)