Fates: The Medea Notebooks, Starfish Wash-Up, and overflow of an unknown self: a song of songs
By Ann Pedone, Katherine Soniat, and D. M. Spitzer

A Study Guide

Synopsis

Fates is three books in one: The Medea Notebooks by Ann Pedone, Starfish Wash-Up by Katherine Soniat, and overflow of an unknown self: a song of songs by D. M. Spitzer. The poets in this collection weave destinies by reimagining stories from the past. Each book of this Tribus, at once a daring translation and a rich original work of art, offers a distinct poetic voice. When read together, the books of Fates transform into a collective love song.

Author Bios

Ann Pedone is the author of The Italian Professor’s Wife (2022, Press 53), as well as the chapbooks The Bird Happened, perhaps there is a sky we don’t know: a re-imagining of sappho, Everywhere You Put Your Mouth, Sea[break], and DREP/AM/WORK. Her work has recently appeared in The American Journal of Poetry, Chicago Quarterly Review, The Louisville Review, and New York Quarterly. She has been nominated for Best of the Net, and has appeared as Best American Poetry’s “Pick of the Week.”

Katherine Soniat’s Starfish Wash-Up is her ninth collection of poetry. She has previously published two collections with Louisiana State University Press, The Swing Girl (2011) and Bright Stranger (2016), and a third collection, Polishing the Glass Storm, will be available through LSU Press in fall, 2022. The Goodbye Animals won the Turtle Island Chapbook Award (2014). She has been on the faculty at Hollins University and Virginia Tech, and has taught in the Great Smokies Writing Program at UNC/Asheville. Her poetry has appeared in Hotel Amerika, Poetry, Iowa Review, The Nation, Women’s Review of Books, and Superstition Review, among others.

Reasons to Include in the Classroom

Fates explores the powers and possibilities of reimagining stories from the past. A study in mythology, religion, and translation, this collection illuminates the different ways contemporary poets use imagery, voice, sound, and form to expand and comment on topics ranging from love, marriage, and betrayal, to lost children, missing parents, and our suffering planet, to sexuality, diversity, and inclusion. By reading and studying Fates, students have an opportunity not only to hone their analytical skills, but also to engage in critical discussions about why and how poetry matters. The poems in this collection serve as exemplars, inspiring writers to consider how they may bring stories from the past forward and offer new, singular voices that enrich ongoing conversations.
Study Questions & Writing Prompts

Pre-Reading Questions

1. Who are the Fates? What might you expect from a collection entitled *Fates*?

2. Preview the entire book. What do you notice about the layout of the book and the different forms of the poems? As you preview *Fates*, make a list of words and images that stand out to you.

3. Choose one poem from each book and read the poem aloud. How would you describe the voices of the poems?

4. The three books that comprise this collection are based on mythological and religious stories from the past. What is the story of Medea? Telemachus? The “Song of Songs”?

5. How would you describe your experiences with reading poetry? How is reading poetry different from reading fiction? Nonfiction?

The Medea Notebooks

1. Consider the title, *The Medea Notebooks*. What does Ann Pedone’s use of the word “notebooks” suggest? How does “notebooks” help set a purpose to your reading?

2. The book begins with an epigraph from the opera singer Maria Callas: “Love is much better, my dear, when you are not married.” As you read, consider what messages the poems convey about love, marriage, and betrayal.

3. After the epigraph, Pedone includes a note that begins with the statement, “[m]ost books have one beginning; this one had three.” Read the note. Why might the poet have included it? What does the note tell you about the poet’s writing process?

4. Review the list of characters. Who is Medea? Jason of the Argonauts? Maria Callas? Aristotle Onassis? Notice that the author of *The Medea Notebooks* is also one of the characters. What do you expect from a collection of poems that features characters? How might the characters’ stories intersect? As you read, take notes on how the stories respond to one another.

5. The book begins with the poem, “Medea’s Prologue.” What ideas and themes are introduced in the prologue?

The Medea Notebooks (cont’d)

6. As you read, make a list of primary images from the Medea poems, the writer’s iMessages, and the Callas poems. How would you describe the imagery from each set of poems? What are the similarities among the images? What are the differences?

7. The poet juxtaposes poems and iMessages. What is the effect of this juxtaposition? How does the poet’s use of iMessages serve as commentary on the Medea and Callas poems?

8. Compare and contrast the voices in the poems, “Jason And The Princess of Corinth” and “Medea Somewhere on The Shores of The Aegean.” How do the speakers in the poems discuss desire? Betrayal?

9. Read “A Lacanian Reading of Medea.” Who was Jacques Lacan? What were some of his theories? What is meant by a Lacanian reading of Medea?

10. *The Medea Notebooks* reimagines three stories. What does it mean to reimagine? How is a reimagining different from a retelling? How does the poet reimagine the stories of Medea, Maria Callas, and the author of *The Medea Notebooks* and what does the poet emphasize in each story? In other words, what parts of each story does the poet focus on, and how do these emphases inform readers of the book’s major themes?

11. Select a poem from the book that resonates with you and write an imitation of the poem. What new insights did you gain about the original poem by writing an imitation of it?

12. Choose a myth that interests you, along with a story from popular culture that parallels the myth. Write three poems: one in the voice of a character from the myth; one in the voice of a character from pop culture; and the third in the voice of the author (you) as a character. What themes emerge in your poems? What techniques did you use to distinguish the three voices?

Starfish Wash-Up

1. Katherine Soniat includes two notes at the beginning of *Starfish Wash-Up*, the second of which offers a suggestion for how to read the poems: “sequentially within each section…and also from section to section, as one reads a novel.” The poet explains that this approach to reading “enables archetype…to play an integral role.” What is meant by “archetype”? Consider the different levels of reading—literal, metaphorical, interpretative—as you read the book.
Starfish Wash-Up (cont’d)

2. *Starfish Wash-Up* takes its inspiration from a 19th century painting of Telemachus kneeling by the Aegean seashore. Spend a few minutes observing the image of the painting. Write down your observations and then take notes on what the artist emphasizes in the painting. Then look up other images of Telemachus. How does this painting differ from the other images?

3. Read the poem “Telemachus Seeking” aloud. Write down the sounds—vowels and consonants—you hear. The poet Alexander Pope writes, “the sound must seem an echo to the sense.” What does this mean, and how do the sounds of this poem “seem an echo to the sense”? Note the places in the book where you hear similar sounds to those found in this poem.

4. Compare and contrast “Telemachus Seeking” and “Losing Touch.” How does “Losing Touch” serve as both a commentary on and extension of “Telemachus Seeking”?

5. “That Morning I Saw Telemachus” centers on the speaker's reaction to seeing the painting of Telemachus kneeling by the Aegean seashore. What is your interpretation of the lines, “Departure/is why I am called to this reckoning”?

6. *Starfish Wash-Up* is an ekphrastic collection. The word *ekphrasis* comes from Greek and means “description.” According to the Poetry Foundation, “an ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the ‘action’ of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning.” Choose a work of art and write your own ekphrastic poem.

7. For sections ii and iii of the book, make a list of the primary images found in these sections. How would you describe and classify the images? What themes emerge in these sections? Then, as you read sections iv and v, think about how the themes evolve. How does the book move from the archetypes of lost children and missing parents to a lament for our primary mother, Earth? What new images emerge in the final two sections of the book?

8. In the poem, “Embryonic Sons and Daughters,” the speaker comments that the hardest lesson is “how to care for one another.” What poems in the book best represent the challenges of caring for one another and why did you choose these poems?

9. What do the poems “Mother Could I Be” and “My Good Man” suggest about the changing nature of identity?

Starfish Wash-Up (cont’d)

10. When discussing Penelope, the speaker in “Strange That Penelope” wonders if “(Maybe she too would have asked for more/had she known the power of speaking).” Write a poem in which Penelope knows the power of speaking. What does she ask for?

11. Describe the situation of the “Street of the Three Sad Marias.” Then, imitate the poem, choosing your own character from mythology with whom the speaker (“I”) travels around a city.

12. How are the title poem “Starfish Wash-Up” and the concluding poem “Finding Time” examples of *samskara*, the Hindu concept that translates to “he who flows into himself,” the perpetual wanderer passing through previous time—one’s same illusion of self, again and again”?

Overflow of an Unknown Self: A Song of Songs

1. Before reading D. M. Spitzer’s *overflow of an unknown self: a song of songs*, read the notes at the end of the book. What information does the poet include about the history of the *Song of Songs*? How does the poet define *transfiguration*? In section III of the notes, the poet writes that “overflow of an unknown self composes a *Song of Songs* for the transmoment.” What does *heteronormativity* mean, and how does the poet seek to shatter heteronormativity? How is the book an example of the practice of Queer Translation?

2. *Overflow of an unknown self: a song of songs* is comprised of eight cantos. What are cantos? As you read, take notes on the primary images and sounds in each canto. What are some of the recurring images and sounds throughout the book? How would you describe the images? The sounds? What is the effect of repetition?

3. How does the experience of reading this book differ from your experiences reading *The Medea Notebooks* and *Starfish Wash-Up*?

4. Look carefully at the forms of the poems. How does the poet use white space? What variations in form do you notice within and among the cantos?

5. Imagine you are asked to pair each of the eight cantos with music to create a “playlist” for the book. What songs would you choose and why?
Overflow of an Unknown Self: A Song of Songs (cont’d)

6. In Cantos 6, the speaker remarks that “love is terror/an imminent assault/on all you feel.” What is the tone of these lines? Use evidence from the canto to support your answer.

7. Choose one or two lines from the book that resonate most with you and write your own poem in response to the line(s).

8. In what ways is this book a celebration of love? Of poetry? Of diversity?

9. Find examples of poems that are heteronormative. Choose one of the poems and identify the gendered pronouns. Then, rewrite the poem/passage, making it more inclusive.

10. After you finish reading the book, read another version of *Song of Songs*. Compare that version to D. M. Spitzer’s. What are the similarities? The differences? What does each writer emphasize in their version?

The Tribus

1. Consider our three poets, Ann Pedone, Katherine Soniat, and D. M. Spitzer, our Fates. What destiny does each foretell and then weave?

2. Taken together, what themes emerge for you after reading the three books of the Tribus?

3. Identify and describe the different ways the poets use imagery, voice, sound, and form to reimagine stories from the past. What stories might you reimagine and why and how?


5. Enjoyed reading *Fates*? Send your “fan mail” to books@etruscanpress.org, and we’ll share your note with the poets.

Standards for the English Language Arts (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.