

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Blackbird and Wolf

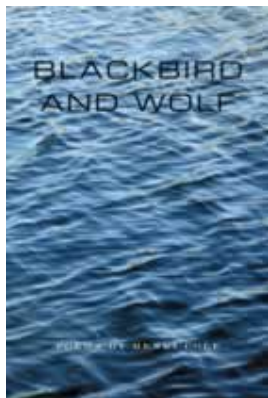
by Henri Cole

Farrar, Straus & Giroux

Prepared by Stephanie Legg
Kingston Public Library, Kingston, MA



SUMMARY



In his sixth book, Cole says he wants to write “something highly controlled/that is the opposite,” and he succeeds. Once a poet of great formal control and dense, somewhat inscrutable lines, Cole (*Middle Earth*) now writes simply and sparsely, mixing autobiography, eros and the natural world in a voice that buzzes with emotion. Single-lined stanzas accentuate the poems’ sparseness, placing great pressure on each line. Cole can devastate (“I’m sorry I cannot say I love you when you say/you love me,”), declaim in deadpan (“I have a fever which I’m treating with gin”) or plainly declare (I’m tired of just being a man”). Many poems look grief in the face, addressing a dying mother, an ex-lover, flowers and animals, an absent god, the disappointing self, even the 43rd president.[*Excerpted from Publishers Weekly*, 254.9 (Feb 26, 2007): 60(1)]

Ultimately, what emerges in these poems, which claim to be neither “confessional nor abstract,” is a kind of abstract confession. It is not so much events that occur, but emotions that shimmer through arrays of bodies called upon to represent them. Words are themselves devourers, extracting as they transform. [Excerpted from Tess Taylor’s review, *Harvard Review* 33 (Dec 2007): 184(3)]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The book progresses through three sections: *Birthday*, *Gravity and Center*, and *Dune*. Does the progress seem natural? Are the tones different in each section? Can you find similar patterns within the sections or are the sections completely different?
2. What animals appear and in what ways do they appear in these poems? Which animals are significant to you? Why? What emotions do they evoke? What could be the importance of the blackbird and the wolf?
3. Water appears in several of the poems in different ways. What are some of those ways? You may also want to include cover art and the introductory, untitled poem.
4. How does the author incorporate people into his poems? Are there obvious relationships described within the different poems? How does the author talk about himself?

5. Cole uses examples of the natural world to compare and contrast events and his reactions to those events. The final poem in the first section, “Self-Portrait with Hornets,” makes the plea “Lord, teach me to live.” Can you find examples of living in this poem? What other poems discuss life and living? What poems describe death and dying?
6. How does the poem “Sycamores” relate to the title of the book’s first section, *Birthday*? What do you think “touching|across some new barrier of touchability” refers to.
7. Do words help Cole in the poem “Gravity and Center”? Why or why not?
8. In the work “Embers,” how does nature support the author’s claim “I exist”?
9. Does Cole’s point of view change in the last section, *Dune*?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henri Cole was born in Fukuoka, Japan, in 1956, and was raised in Virginia. He attended the College of William and Mary, receiving his B.A. in 1978. He received an M.A. in 1980 from University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee and an M.F.A from Columbia University in 1982. He has held teaching or been artist-in-residence at Brandeis University, Columbia University, Davidson College, Harvard University, Reed College, Smith College, Yale College and The College of William and Mary. He is currently a professor at Ohio State University, and maintains a residence in Boston’s South End, giving new meaning to the phrase “long commute.”

Cole’s works of poetry are *Blackbird and Wolf* (2007), *Middle Earth* (2003), *The Visible Man* (1998), *The Look of Things* (1995), *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge* (1989), *The Marble Queen* (1986).

His awards include the Ambassador Book Award in Poetry, the Massachusetts Book Award in Poetry (twice), Lambda Literary Award in Poetry, Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the Berlin Prize of the American Academy in Berlin, the Rome Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Scholarship. He was a finalist for the 2004 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry and has had fellowships from the Camargo Foundation, the Ingram Merrill Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

LINKS OF INTEREST

Academy of American Poets (poets.org) <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/primPID/1083>

American Poetry Review—An Interview with Henri Cole by Christopher Hennessey
http://findarticles.com/p/article/mi_qa3692/is_200405/ai/n9401647/print

Review of *Blackbird and Wolf* by Matthew Yeager
<http://reviews.coldfrontmag.com/emblackbird-and-wolfem-by33.html>

“How I Grew” by Henri Cole
<http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/cole/poetsonpoetry.html>

