

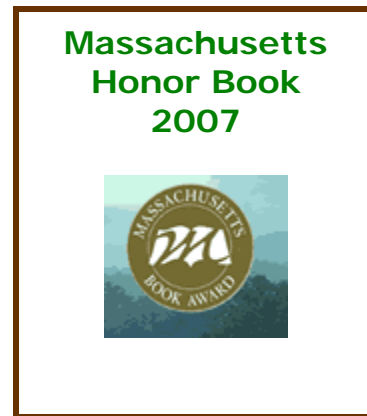
## *God's Silence*

by Franz Wright

Alfred A. Knopf

### A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### SUMMARY

*God's Silence*, by Pulitzer Prize winner Franz Wright, is a collection of poems about life, pre-life, and afterlife. It is a conversation with salvation. The poems are spare, and take the reader into the world of a man who has collapsed to the edges of society, addicted and alienated, and finds his path again. Although Wright is a converted Catholic, these poems are personal, not dogmatic, and can be understood and felt by anyone interested in spirituality.

### BIOGRAPHY

The following biography of Franz Wright is taken from a reprint of an article in the literary journal *Image*, available on the web from *Poetry Daily*, [www.poems.com](http://www.poems.com). It precedes an in-depth interview in which Wright talks about the personal, religious, and poetic sufferings and epiphanies of his life. It's well worth reading as you enter into Wright's world in *God's Silence*. It can be found at [http://www.poems.com/special\\_features/prose/essay\\_wright.php](http://www.poems.com/special_features/prose/essay_wright.php)

Franz Wright is the author of fifteen volumes of poetry including *Ill Lit: New and Selected Poems* (1998), *The Beforelife* (2001), *Walking to Martha's Vineyard* (2003), and *God's Silence* (2006). He is also the translator of work by René Char, Erica Pedretti, and Rainer Maria Rilke. In 2004 he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Walking to Martha's Vineyard*. He is the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts grants, a Whiting Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship, and the PEN/Voelcker Award for poetry. The son of poet James Wright, he began writing as a teenager. When he sent his first poem to his father, who was no longer living with the family, James Wright wrote back: "You're a poet. Welcome to hell." James and Franz Wright are the only father and son to have won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Born in Vienna, Wright grew up in the Midwest and Northern California. He has taught at Emerson College and the University of Arkansas. He has also worked in a mental health clinic in Lexington, Massachusetts, and as a volunteer at the Center for Grieving Children. At the age of sixteen, he suffered from his first episode of clinical depression. He was later diagnosed as manic depressive. For many years, Wright battled alcoholism and drug addiction along with depression. He is now in recovery, a transition he chronicles in his recent volumes of poetry, which also explore his Catholic faith. He lives in Waltham, Massachusetts, with his wife, Beth.

*(From "Image." Wright was interviewed by Ilya Kaminsky and Katherine Towler.)*

## APPROACHES TO DISCUSSION

Two possible ways of approaching this book are through the established book club, where the book is read cover to cover before the discussion, in which case it would be wonderful to also read the online interview cited above. Or a pick-up group can convene without previous reading and read aloud a pre-selected group of poems, leaving readers free to explore the rest of the book after the discussion. We have (fabulous) weekly walk-in public conversations at Forbes Library in Northampton and find that we can cover 6-8 poems in depth in two hours with the latter approach.

### For the Established Book Group

If the book is to be read in its entirety before the discussion, these questions can be handed out in advance, to be considered as everyone reads:

1. The book's title is *God's Silence*, and the phrase "God's silence like the sun," is a motif throughout the book. What does God's silence mean to Wright? And "silence like the sun"? (p.41, 61, 76, 88, 94, 136, 138) Do you find the title illuminates poems where the phrase doesn't occur?
2. Snow is another motif in the book. As you read, note when it occurs. Consider its use and possible ramifications. What about desert? October? Mansion? "Three pounds of sentient meat?"
3. According the Catholic catechism, we are made in the image and likeness of God. Who is God in Franz Wright's eyes?
4. What is Wright's view of life on earth?
5. Consider Wright's use of form, especially his use of one or two word lines. What does this visual highlighting do when used in specific poems?
6. Titles often tell us how to read a poem, often help us to ask about a something deeper in the poem that may not be apparent. What do the following titles tell us about the poems they head? "Paying," p. 74; "Kindness," p. 78; "Introduction," p.86; "Love," p. 99 (The Greek words at the end of this poem are beginning of the Gospel of John, John 1:1, "In the beginning was the word"); "Poet's Room in a Museum," p.115.

### For the Walk-In Group

Michael Cunningham once described the best reader of his poems as the woman who keeps and reads a book of poems on her nightstand, the woman's gardener, who perhaps doesn't read poetry, an academic, and a poet (forgive the paraphrase, Mr. Cunningham, remembered from a distant past). What he was suggesting is that a poem goes out into the world and belongs to the reader. The wider the variety of mind that shares in the experience of reading a single poem, the better. A walk-in group may achieve that variety.

Have the group read each of the following poems out loud. Twice is best, by two different readers.

**“Four Poems of Youth,”** p. 32

- Consider the words used to connote time in this poem, “Youth,” “later,” “now,” “the second hand,” “Anniversary.” What do they convey individually and collectively?
- How does “On the Run” work with the other three sections?
- How do the four sections fit together?
- Why is the last section a poem of youth?

**“Arkansas Good Friday,”** p. 58

Section I:

- Explore the possibilities of “what the cross means” as illuminated in the poem. Its “aerodynamic properties”? As a “first stick figure”? Like stick figures, “some with the heads of birds”?
- Explore the possibilities of what it means to say “Everyone knows [what the cross means,] or will before long?”
- Discuss Wright’s depiction of his father in light of his understanding of what it is to carry this cross.

Section II: Who is the “you” of the first stanza?

Section III:

- Who, then, is the “you” of the third section? The same “you,” as in II? Or an evolving “you”? Or both?
- In many poems, Wright uses inconsistent upper case when talking about or to God. Discuss these choices.
- Do you find your concept of “Everyone knows...or will before long” from the first stanza changed or expanded with these last lines, “I will know what to say at the end: What end?”

**“Dawn Walks in Blue and Diamonds,”** p. 72

- Discuss the characterization of the sleeping woman in the poem. Do all the lines of the poem refer to her, or only selected ones?
- There are three references to fire in the poem. Discuss these instances. What does fire mean to Wright here? Is it the same or different in each of its mentionings?
- The title is stated three times, the first two in the present tense, the last time in the past tense. Discuss what the title means as metaphor, and discuss what it means to move from present to past tense in the progression of the poem.

**“Paying,”** p. 74

- Paying for what? In what currency?
- Wright was born in 1953. Discuss the two references to stone in the poem (one in conjunction with 1953,) and what they might mean.
- Discuss what “granite static” might mean.

**“Example,”** p. 108

- How is this an example?
- Consider each word in this tiniest of poems: “And,” “Ariadne.” “Artery.” And the dash.
- Is this a personal poem, or a poem meant for the universal reader? Can you see how it fits with the rest of the poems?

**“Nebraska Blizzard,”** p. 109

This poem proceeds along in a graspable narrative way except for two lines.

- Discuss “60,000 years ago you opened my lips.” What do you think occurred 60,000 years ago? What does the opening of lips signify? In the context of the poem?
- What does “reflected in a knife: my brother, the death of the body,” mean? Is it autobiographical or metaphorical? Does it matter?
- What is the implication of the last line?

**“I Am Listening,”** p. 139

- How is the author listening? To what, or for what?
- This poem has an odd syntax, often missing the “to” heading of an infinitive verb. For instance, “How resubmerge this broken.” What do these choices do in the poem? Do you understand the poem differently without them?

**“Prescience,”** p. 75

- Consider the title in the multiple ways it can be read, “pre-science” and “prescience.”
- In what ways does this poem reflect and refract off the other poems read?



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