

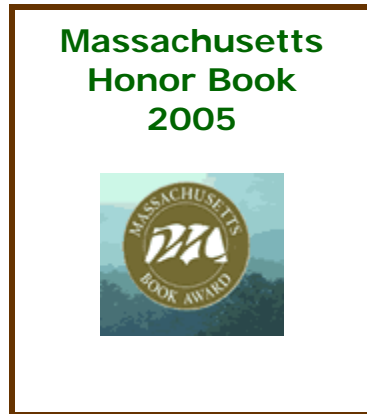
Goodbye to the Orchard

by Steven Cramer

Sarabande Books

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Jennifer Harris and Lee Regan
Plymouth Public Library, Plymouth, MA



SUMMARY:

Excerpted from Publisher's Weekly:

The poet's young children, his affectionate wife and his sister, recently dead from cancer, dominate this deft fourth volume from the Massachusetts-based Cramer (*The Eye That Desires to Look Upward*). Like Robert Pinsky (whom several poems thank by name), Cramer seeks a civil, reasonable voice, a voice that brings rhyming forms and meters painlessly into middle-class American life: the "paper wasp" and "haze of gnats" in his orchard lead easily to the "so-called Secret Garden" of poets long dead. Despite the eponymous pastorals, however, Cramer is most at home in directly autobiographical lyric. Tender, surprising poems describe his wife's pregnancy ("The Toughest Thing") and shared adventures in raising a daughter and son ... A sheaf of elegies give the middle of the book a somber tone, from "the month my sister barely ate or drank" to memories after her death. Cramer's love poems sound genuine and affecting, and his command of everyday detail—"the circular wash/ of a street sweep's brush, strident jays, brats/ on Schwinn's"—is inarguable. -- Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the overall composition of *Goodbye to the Orchard*? Is there a beginning, middle, and an end? Does the order of the poems make a difference?
2. "Orchard" is a common word – but highly evocative. What does the word mean to you? Read aloud the title poem, "Goodbye to the Orchard." Why is this poem/title important to the collection as a whole? Why does it occur near the end of Part 1 rather than at the beginning?
3. What recurring images appear in these poems? How do these images change - or not change - within the context of the poems? How is the passage of time portrayed?
4. In *Goodbye to the Orchard*, the poet juxtaposes classical and pop culture references. Identify examples from the poems. What effect does this have? How does this technique fit into the order and emotions of the poems?

5. Mortality is an important theme in this book. What images does the poet use to “talk” about mortality?
6. The first word in the book is *defeat* and the last word is *alive*. Do these brackets have particular meaning for this book?
7. The poems in Part II are formally diverse: a sonnet (p.31), a lyric in free verse (p.38) – even a Pantoum (p.40). Read the three poems aloud. What is the effect of this variety? Why might the poet have chosen to craft the poems in Part II in this way?
8. To close the discussion, ask each member of the group to read a favorite poem from the book and discuss why it was chosen. Allow some time for final discussion and reflection.

ACTIVITIES, LISTENING, AND REFLECTION:

1. Read aloud *Morning Walk in the Orchard* and *Goodbye to the Orchard*. As the poems are read, ask the group to make notes of their observations. Share what you have written. Are certain words evocative? Funny? Surprising?
2. Steven Cramer’s subjects are contemporary and commonplace. How has he made the familiar universal?
3. What is your favorite line in *Goodbye to the Orchard*? Write it down. Now write a four/five line poem with that line in it.
4. The poem “Sixties Couple, the Haight” is filled with references to popular culture. Jot down as many pop culture references as you can in 2 minutes. Now combine several into a poem.
5. In the world of painting, music, or writing, ask each member of the group to find one example of the artistic expression of loss, death, or grief. Share these examples. How does the artistic approach differ from religion or psychology?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Steven Cramer is the author of three poetry collections: *The Eye that Desires to Look Upward* (1987), *The World Book* (1992), and *Dialogue for the Left and Right Hand* (1997). His poems and criticism have appeared in numerous literary journals, including *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Nation*, the *New Republic*, *The Paris Review*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, and *TriQuarterly*, as well as *The POETRY Anthology, 1912-2002*. Steven Cramer currently directs the low-residency Masters in Fine Arts program in creative writing at Lesley University in Cambridge and lives in Lexington, Massachusetts.

HELPFUL IDEAS, SOURCES & LINKS:

Interview with Steven Cramer in *Perihelion*:

<http://www.webdelsol.com/Perihelion/p-profile15.htm>

Sarabande Books page on *Goodbye to the Orchard*

<http://www.sarabandebooks.org/sarabande/Authors/Steven%20Cramer/109422315832>

General Sites of Interest:

Academy of American Poets

<http://www.poets.org>

The Favorite Poem Project

<http://www.favoritepoem.org>

Poetry Forms and Terminology

<http://thewordshop.tripod.com/forms.html>

Poetry 180 Project created by Billy Collins, 2001 Poet Laureate in the United States

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/poetry/poetry-general.html>

Additional Resources:

Poetry Speaks: hear great poets read their work, from Tennyson to Plath. Editor: Elise Paschen. Naperville, Ill: Sourcebooks MediaFusion, c2001

Poets & Writers: Poets & Writers Magazine. Published bi-monthly. ISSN 0891-6136
PO Box 543 Mount Morris, IL 61054 phone: (815) 734-1123



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