

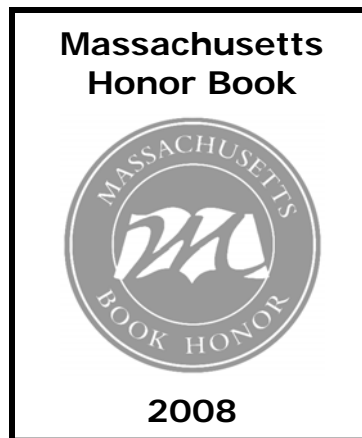
## A Reading and Discussion Guide

### *Gulf Music*

by Robert Pinsky

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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Worcester Public Library, Worcester, MA



### SUMMARY



The gulf in the title of Pinsky's seventh collection is both the large southern body of water that has been the site of so much weather-related misery, and the unavoidable distances between an author's thoughts and feelings and his expression. Poems from the first section frequently butt up against subjects too large for speech, and break down into music and mystery. The title poem begins with a devastating hurricane in Galveston in 1900 and reaches after fragments and song to recall what was lost: O try my tra-la-la, ma la belle, mah wallah-woe. Another poem describes the ecstasy of forgetting, in which an enraptured audience at once hears and doesn't hear what it's being told. Pinsky (*Jersey Rain*) describes solid things in the second section, though he can't help noting that thing itself first meant to confer or address. Of a camera, he writes, The flash of your hammer/ Fashions

the shelter. Signs of Pinsky's craftsmanship abound. Perhaps most laudable is that Pinsky—a former Poet Laureate and one of America's best-known poets—is not above self-criticism: in writing about peace, his last thought compares his own mind to a monkey who fires his shit in handfuls from the cage. — Excerpted from *Publishers Weekly*. Copyright © 2008 Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier, Inc. All rights reserved.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Robert Pinsky once said, “I would like to write a poetry which could contain every kind of thing, while keeping all the excitement of poetry.” How much do the poems in *Gulf Music* measure up to that standard? What kind of “things” do you think the poet had in mind?
2. In “First Things to Hand,” the poet uses ordinary objects as a springboard for his thoughts. Which objects does he most succeed in bringing to life? Could the objects be ordered differently?
3. In an interview in *The Progressive*, Pinsky said, “I think the rhythms in a lot of my writing are an attempt to create that feeling of a beautiful, gorgeous jazz solo that gives you more emotion and some more and coming around with some more, and it’s the same

but it's changed, and the rhythm is very powerful, but it is also lyricism." In terms of its sounds, rhythms, and various movements, how does the title poem compare to a jazz solo?

4. In his Note at the back of the volume, Pinsky talks about what he calls "the haunted ruin of my consciousness." What role do memories and free associations play in *Gulf Music*? How does the theme of memory and forgetting run through the various poems? Do you see the poet's memories as personal, or universal?
5. The poet's voice is made up of diverse elements, from playful to meditative. Compare the voice of "Gulf Music" to the voice of "Akmatova's Summer Garden." How would you characterize each style? Do you prefer one style to another?
6. What do you think of "Poem with Lines in Any Order"? What is the point of the exercise? Where would you start the poem? Where would you end it?

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Robert Pinsky is widely regarded as one of the most distinguished poets of his generation. Born in New Jersey in 1940, he received a bachelor's degree from Rutgers University in 1962 and a doctorate from Stanford University in 1966. In his 40-year career, he has taught at the University of Chicago, Wellesley College, University of California at Berkeley, and Boston University, and served as a guest lecturer at Harvard University and Washington University. He is the author of seven volumes of poetry, numerous books of criticism, and the award-winning *Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation*.

Pinsky has received many awards for his work, including an American Academy of Arts and Letters Award (1979), a Guggenheim fellowship (1980), the William Carlos Williams Prize (1984), and the Academy of American Poets' Howard Morton Landon Prize for Translation (1995). *The Figured Wheel: New and Collected Poems 1966-1996* (1996) was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

In 1997, Robert Pinsky was named Poet Laureate of the United States, and in that role he brought unprecedented public attention to poetry until 2000. He is remembered for establishing and directing the Favorite Poem Project, a yearlong undertaking that invited ordinary Americans to name their favorite poems, culminating in a published volume and a collection of 100 spoken recordings archived at the Library of Congress.

Robert Pinsky is the poetry editor of *Slate* and teaches in the graduate creative writing program at Boston University. He and his wife, Ellen, have three grown daughters and live in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

## SITES OF INTEREST

Academy of American Poets  
<http://www.poets.org>

The Favorite Poem Project  
<http://www.favoritepoem.org>

Brouwer, Joel. “The Civic Poet,” a review of *Gulf Music* in the *New York Times*, February 3, 2008).

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/03/books/review/Brouwer-t.html>

“Robert Pinsky – U.S. Poet Laureate – Interview” by Anne-Marie Cusac (*The Progressive*, May 1999).

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