

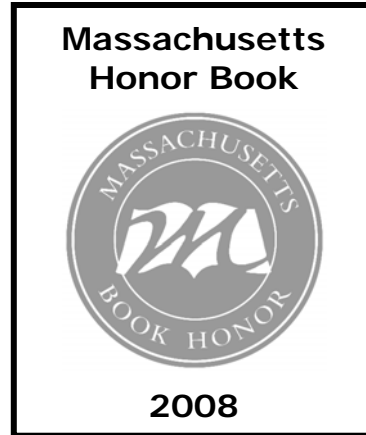
## A Reading and Discussion Guide

### *If No Moon*

By Moira Linehan

Southern Illinois University Press

Prepared by Teresa M. Pfeifer, MFA, MLIS  
Alfred Zanetti Montessori Magnet Library



“There is a calm insistence—a fearlessness, really—in Moira Linehan’s willingness to ask the large and abiding questions: What constitutes faith? How do we live with the past? And, above all, when will grieving end? She asks such questions, as Milosz once put it, ‘not out of sorrow, but in wonder.’ These are quiet and impeccably crafted poems. But, more importantly, they possess courage.” —**David Wojahn**, author of *Interrogation Palace: New and Selected Poems*  
[From the back cover of *If No Moon*]

### SUMMARY



*If No Moon* is a travel map of sorts, detailing Linehan’s inner landscape of loss upon the death of her husband from cancer. Four carefully chosen sections present his illness and death, the author’s “dark withdrawal into grief”; and her insistence on finding her way back to a life renewed with meaning. The signatory poem, “Quarry” invites us to travel into a dark quarry of her mind where “there’s still that other body/ divers found, then lost when the markers/ floated loose...” Linehan’s is that other body, the one that may surface at the end of the long, torturous labor of grief.

In Part Three, Linehan seeks connection to anything human, such as the widows of Inishmore and their untold stories of loss. She’s told by one woman that the weather is “*so wicked you could emigrate/ and never come back. Or murder yourself (39).*” Poems about family --her father, mother, brother-- appear as personal buoys to support her, but there is nothing she can cleave to that will lift her from dark water. Part Four opens in water (“...all first floors/ in Venice flooded to the knees that morning ...(55).”

Words and themes weave themselves throughout the collection: water, flooding, to come back, the difficulty in speaking, and the fear of madness. End lines of poems often connect to their neighboring poem, sections connect by sister poems from one section to the next. Knitting, sewing, criss-crossing, circling back, being submerged and surfacing, are constant themes.

It is no wonder that in a collection centered on profound loss the poems work painstakingly at finding connections among themselves. We are witness to the poet’s struggle to re-establish her connection with the world. This collection will be immediately recognized by those who have experienced profound grief and struggled to find that at times those “waters/ recede, sometimes for weeks, all on their own...” (56).

## APPROACHES TO BOOK GROUPS

Readers should have the questions in-hand before the book group meeting so that they can spend time reading, reflecting, and finding their own ways to relate to the poems, ready to share their insights and any notes that they may have jotted down in response to the questions.

Before discussion, readers will need to consider how they will refer to the speaker in the poems. (The assumption that the poems are autobiographical seems fine in this case).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the purpose served by the book's epigraph, Seamus Heaney's "To a Dutch Potter in Ireland":

To have lived it through and now be free to give  
Utterance, body and soul – to wake and know  
Every time that it's gone and gone for good, the thing  
That nearly broke you –  
Is worth it all...

2. Keeping in mind Seamus Heaney's "To a Dutch Potter in Ireland," consider places Linehan may be struggling to "give utterance" in Part One of the collection. How does syntax and word repetition mirror that struggle, sometimes as if breathing were difficult? How does the poet's use of repetition and jagged syntax suggest stammering, and an inability to speak? Where does the poet directly address the need to talk, to speak, to name it? Are there other poems in the collection that explain why speaking may be difficult?
3. Read the signature poem "Quarry" aloud. Linehan often uses description, an image to speak for an emotional state. In this poem, images of lost bodies, drowning, being submerged by water, seem to fuse with the emotional state of the poet; the boundaries between them seem to merge. In one line she tells us that there is a "quarry in my mind" and later she speaks of the "markers/ floated loose." Are there other lines in this poem that seem to speak about the poet rather than the news account? In what ways could "Quarry" be a guide for how we are to read the collection?
4. What is the trajectory of grief from section to section?
5. Linehan often uses an image to mirror her own experience. Are there any images in the book that you find speak to you more strongly than others? Why?
6. Enjambment, a device sometimes used by poets to highlight the many ways in which a word or end of a line can resonant with other intended meanings, is sometimes used by Linehan. For example, read the following lines from "The New Part" (55) pausing at the end of each line to consider the multiple meanings the end words can convey: "...drained in an hour and I was out again,/ following the twisting canals. Alone./ It took me no time at all to get lost/ in the novel..." Find other poems with examples of her use of enjambment. Why the added layer of meaning? What different feelings does that layer add?
7. Compare "Quarry (3)" and "The New Part (55)." Are there other references to water in the collection? What purpose does water serve?

8. Count the number of times “back” is written in part four. Discuss the different meanings this word may have. Is there a relentless usage of this word?
9. In the brave and humorous poem “All Over Again (60)” the poet meets up with her husband in heaven. In their less than perfect exchange the husband will never “turn and ask, “*How were those years/ for you?*”
10. What new emotional tones are present in this poem?
11. One of the most moving poems in the collection comes in Part Four, “Back into Place (62).” What is suggested by the cygnet’s flight? How might it be spiritual? Do you hear other metaphorical references to spirituality in the collection? How does the metaphor speak to the other poems in the collection?
12. Considering the collection in its entirety, what meaning does the Winslow Homer painting chosen for the book’s cover seem to convey? Discuss gender representation, location, weather, light.
13. Other contemporary poets such as Sharon Olds, Linda Gregg, Ellen Doré Watson, and Mark Doty have written extensively about loss. Critics uncomfortable with their choice of subject have often objected to their using the material of their grief as a source for poetry. What are your views on this subject? Are there subjects to which poets should or should not gravitate? What roles might a poet play in society?

## **EXTENDING THE DISCUSSION**

Discussion members may be invited back to a writing workshop related to the book. The workshop envisioned is a supportive writing group in which poems and/or first lines are used as writing prompts. The members of this group should be given the prompt and allowed to write for ten to fifteen minutes. They may continue writing after that time or join the others to read their initial drafts. Community members of a supportive writing group should agree to the following rules: During feedback it is acceptable to simply thank the writer for sharing. If prompted to give more feedback, say what you as a listener remember, what you liked, what stays. Do not discuss the writing as personal experience. Do not critique the writing. Remember, it is a writing workshop about writing, assume that there is no one present trained in counseling. These guidelines come from an excellent guide by Pat Schneider, *Writing Alone and with Others*, Oxford University Press, 2003. In an aging community, in which stories of spousal loss often prevail, such a writing group would prove powerfully compelling.

## **MORE GROUP WRITING ACTIVITIES**

- Invite participants to listen to a reading of “Crows” (60). Write the first line, “Whoever said *Straight as a crow flies*....and keep going.
- Listening for enjambment in “Penelope” (9) remember someone from your past. Recall some activity that they often repeated. Describe them during that activity paying attention to the associative nature of words at the end of lines.

- Write a letter to someone (yourself?) about everything “back” means to you. Keep going. Use “back” in as many ways as you can. Explore what you would want to come back, give back, back up when your back’s up.
- Choose a title from the book that you like. Write that title. Begin writing. When you’re stuck write another title. Continue for at least twenty minutes.
- Choose one word from each of five poems and use those words in what you write.

Note to Group Leader: Remember to honor the vulnerability of each writer by simply accepting the gift by stating, “thank you.”

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Moira Linehan is a former high school English teacher. Her poems have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Poetry*, and other journals. Her book, *If No Moon*, won the 2006 Crab Orchard Series in Poetry Open Competition and was published in 2007.

## TOPICAL LINKS

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[http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Aran\\_Islands\\_Inishmore\\_Ireland.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Aran_Islands_Inishmore_Ireland.jpg)

General Links for Poetry Groups and Others

A Guide to Discussion of Poetics

<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/archive/feature.guidebook.hirsch.html>

The Academy of American Poets

<http://www.poets.org>

A Poetry Book Club

<http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/44>



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