

# *Memoir of the Hawk*

by James Tate

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## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### **SUMMARY:**

In 2001, James Tate published *Memoir of the Hawk*, a book of narrative poems in which unexpected logic leads to amazing realizations. Though the book shifts constantly between many different characters and views, the speaker is consistently a keen observer of the small-town world around him. He points out absurdities in this world, but does not provide explanations for them. The result is often a kind of humor that is particular to these poems, as in “The London Times,” where “It is widely rumored that the current Queen pees/ a little on each rose every morning.”

Many of the poems begin in narrow settings, and at first it seems like their characters do not apply to the larger world. However, by the time the poems end, Tate has opened them up to encompass all of us. In “The Fine Rain,” the speaker begins by telling the reader about a poker game where he loses everything. Walking home in the rain, he realizes he has spent his whole life in one place. The poem ends with “Everyone dreams, but none escape, darting/ glances, the lucky day to come.” The poem “Bitterness” starts at a dog show and ends with “The world wobbled off its/ axis and a foul wind blew.”

A sense of community is reentered by the frequent use of “we,” as in “Denied Areas:” “We keep moving, not always in straight/ lines but we keep moving...It can be stressful, though/ sometimes we break into song without warning.” The feeling one gets when reading this poem is that we are not alone in this strange world.

Loneliness, too, is an important theme in *Memoir of the Hawk*. If these poems take place within communities and small towns, then it is also true that some of the characters are lost within these small places, within their own families, marriages and worlds. In “Swift, Silent and Deadly,” the speaker is a son telling us about his parents. The father has never gotten over “the war.” We learn in a terrifying but beautiful way what this is like for his wife when the poem ends, “At dinner he eats to gain strength/ for the night will be long, cold and dark. Mother/ moves silently, with the certain knowledge that/ she will die before this war has ended.” In “The Shadowlife,” a woman tries to decide what to do with her life now that her husband, who made their marriage miserable for fifty-five years, is dead. She finally gives up, saying, “And then/ I will die and no doubt join Oscar in hell. /

Perhaps death will have weakened him just a/ little.” Tate reaches this conclusion in a beautiful, humorous way, but the sadness and waste feels tangible.

In *Memoir of the Hawk*, love exists in a surreal world. “Vale of the White Horse” starts out like a fairytale with “That’s where I first met my bride.” The speaker finds her under a chestnut tree and takes her to the hospital. The doctor says, “There’s no doubt about it, / she is your bride.” The speaker then tells us, “We kissed, and thus the Trans-/ Canadian Highway was born.” Here there is a kind of love, but is unlike any we know. *Memoir of the Hawk* is filled with these moments, mysteries that are familiar to us but exist differently here, in beautiful, surprising, humorous ways that reinforce the purpose of imagination in poetry.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. “The Bookclub” ends with a description of someone as “Looking badly in need of repair.” In what ways is this idea prevalent in the book?
2. In a few instances, Tate mentions specific places as various as Guatemala, Bart’s Ice Cream, the Trans-Canadian Highway. How does the mentioning of these places from time to time effect the mood of the poems? What does the mentioning of these places make you feel?
3. In the poems “Just to Feel Human,” “Vale of the White Horse,” and “The Splendid Rainbow,” love functions in very different ways. How do these kinds of love relate to your own feelings about love?
4. How do animals and humans relate to each other in *Memoir of the Hawk*? How are the animals in “Morbidly Anxious” and “New Blood” similar to one another? How are they different?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

James Tate was born in Kansas City in 1943. He has written numerous volumes of poetry, beginning in 1967 with *The Lost Pilot*, which was selected for the Yale Series of Younger Poets. In 1991 his *Selected Poems* won the Pulitzer Prize and the William Carlos Williams award. He has won a National Institute of Arts and Letters Award for Poetry and the Wallace Stevens Award, and has also received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. A Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, James Tate teaches poetry writing at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

## HELPFUL LINKS:

For more information on James Tate, check out the following websites:

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?45442B7C000C0104>

Academy of American Poets website. Includes a few poems and a sound clip.

<http://citypaper.net/articles/031998/20q.shtml>

Philadelphia City Paper website. Includes an interview.



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