

Multitudes, Poems Selected & New

by Afaa Michael Weaver

Sarabande Books

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Afaa Michael Weaver's book, *Multitudes*, published in 2000, contains selected work from his five previous books, and twenty-three new poems. Most of the work is lyrical and heavy with honest emotion: feelings about the death of his first son, his consequent madness, and family relationships. The poems' narratives draw remarkable associations as they move toward endings that are surprising and perceptive. In "Radio Days," his relationship with his father spreads over the other men in his life, his son and his brother. "The four of us/ are a circuit where the current is/ a stream of hope & fear, floating, / going back, living and not living... We hold up our hands and dreams/ fly out of them, birds of blue electric." Particularly beautiful is the way he forges something out of the damage people do to one another. He asserts that there is beauty in the unspoken signals between family members, beauty in the way we are forced to give ourselves up to this bond. Characteristically Weaver does not tell us that the positives outweigh the negatives or vice versa; there are never any easy answers, and rightly so.

In the poem "The Madman Raises the Dead," the speaker visits the grave of his dead child, and says, "I kneel near the stone cross above/ your grave, watching the grass shudder, / waiting for this night to burn and fall/ so that every dead soul that touches/ your bones will fill with air and sing." Here is the very human need to take some sort of comfort in the death of a loved one. Weaver seems to be saying that this is how to survive in a world where God is neither good nor bad, but certainly strange and unexplainable. In "Borders," Weaver writes, "I have felt God tinker with man's differences, / moving through our quartered spaces, / making strangers of the same flesh and blood." In "The Incomplete Heart," Weaver explains an incident a year after his son's death, saying, "I had gone insane. I wanted to forget/ the power was given to God, / who had took my son and my mind." God sits over everything, and the poems never try to explain it all away, letting lyric beauty suffice.

Throughout *Multitudes*, Weaver also deals with race in poems full of emotion and truth. As Arnold Rampersad writes in the book's introduction, "While he is alert to the lessons of African-American history, to issues of gender, race, and class, his obsession as a writer is centered in the self and not in ideology." Weaver draws on what he knows: a life of

experience. Particularly beautiful is the poem “The Poets,” about the basketball games between his (mostly white) Polytechnic high school’s team and the famed team from Dunbar High School in Baltimore, the Poets. He writes, “We, the black folk at Polytechnic, / wished from the white sea of equality/ that Dunbar would stamp blackness/ all over this stiff building to save us...The Dunbar Poets made baskets/ while strolling, dreaming of rivers.” It is an idea that is beautiful, but loaded in many ways with the view of the other side, where “Breath held back ‘nigger’ in the air/ over the bleachers.” It is also a view born of himself, born of the poet’s chief concern: an expression of understanding. In the context of Weaver’s work, this desire to understand and be understood is so important: after more than five books, it is still what he is working on.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How is Weaver’s relationship with his father dealt with in this book? In what ways do the poems “My Father’s Geography” and “Life in a Steel Mill” speak to this relationship?
2. What role does music play in poetry for Afaa Michael Weaver?
3. In many poems, Weaver looks back on his childhood. In poems such as “Humility,” “Mama’s Hoodlum,” and “Michele,” how does Weaver portray his mother? In poems like “Life in a Steel Mill” and “The Poet Reclining,” how does Weaver portray his mother differently?
4. How do the poems in which Weaver deals with the death of his son reflect his ideas about his own childhood?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Try writing a poem about what you were like ten or twenty years ago. Remember something that happened and look at it as if you were in the same situation now.
2. Write a poem about your family. Incorporate the ways in which family helps and/or harms you.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Afaa Michael Weaver, formerly known as Michael S. Weaver, was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1951. After working in a factory in Baltimore for fifteen years, he completed his B.A. at Regents College in 1986, and his M.F.A. from Brown University in 1987. He has written seven books of poems, including *Water Song* in 1985 and *Talisman* in 1998. Weaver is also a freelance journalist, fiction writer, and playwright. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on

the Arts. He edits *Obsidian III*, and is the Alumnae Professor of English at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts.

HELPFUL LINKS:

For more information on Afaa Michael Weaver, check out these websites:

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=172>

Academy of American Poets website. Includes a sound clip of Weaver reading “My Father’s Geography.”

<http://www.pewarts.org/98/Weaver/>

Pew Fellowships website. Includes biographical information and a few poems.



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