

Natural History

by Dan Chiasson

Alfred A. Knopf

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Natural History is Dan Chiasson's second volume of poetry following *The Afterlife of Objects* in 2002. Inspired in part by Pliny's encyclopedic *Historia Naturalis*, this collection of poems ruminates on the crossings of lived and literary experiences, the fantastical, and the mundane. *Natural History* intimates that a person can be compared to a world, filled with complexities and wonders—and arguably in need of an all-inclusive guide, a compendium of everything known. At times willfully brainy, but often very funny, the poems explore anxieties, heartaches and pleasures. Noted for his free-wheeling approach and hipster references, Chiasson manages to combine everyday language with literary ambitions. His style blends classic, often heart-wrenching lyrical lines with a playful, curious approach to the standard poem.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In Chiasson's "Notes" at the end of his book, he tells us that the title of his collection refers to Pliny the Elder's *Historia Naturalis*, which he first encountered after reading Italo Calvino's essay on it, "Man, the Sky and the Elephant." He says "The poems in the title sequence and the longer poem that closes the book derived elements in their stance, their voice and their cadence from Pliny. In a very few cases, as in the Elephant (I), I have borrowed images and phrases from Pliny as well." Examine the three poems called "Elephant" and bear in mind that Pliny identified the elephant as the animal spiritually "closest to man." "*Maximum est elephas proximumque humanis sensibus*" is the opening to Pliny's *Historia Naturalis*, Book VIII. How does this premise shape the three Elephant poems? Also, consider the following passage from Calvino's essay:

In fact, the elephant recognizes the language of his homeland, obeys orders, remembers what he learns, knows the passion of love and the ambition of glory, practices virtues "rare even among men," such as probity, prudence and equity, and has a religious veneration for the sun, the moon, and the stars. From "Man, the sky and the elephant" pp. 315-330 of *The Uses of Literature* by Italo Calvino, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1986.

How do these elephant traits relate to Chiasson's three Elephant poems?

2. In the 8th poem of Chiasson's *Natural History* series titled "Pliny," the author states "As a child in Rome, I dreamed someday I would be Emerson's "transparent eyeball." The following is the passage from "Nature" of which Chiasson speaks:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what period so ever of life is always a child. In the woods, is perpetual youth. Within these plantations of God, a decorum and a sanctity reign, a perennial festival is dressed, and the guest sees not how he should tire of them in a thousand years. In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground, -- my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. *From "Nature" p. 6 of The Selected Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Modern Library, New York, 1940.*

Discuss Chiasson's "Pliny" poem as it relates to the above passage. Do any of the other poems in the series use the image of the "transparent eyeball" for inspiration?

3. As Italo Calvino says in the essay cited by Chiasson, "When we think of Pliny, we never know to what extent we should attribute the ideas he expresses to the author himself. He is in fact scrupulous about inserting as little of himself as possible and sticking to what his sources tell him."

Chiasson, on the other hand, seems to enjoy referring to himself in the third person. He even gets deceased poets to do the job for him. Randall Jarrell confesses, "I've never written in a way that really pleases Dan/His opinion is invaluable to me, but I am shy" Horace too gets into the act -- "as usual,/translating Dan Chiasson's/petty agonies into his frantic ancient Latin." What purpose does the inclusion of Chiasson himself in "Four Horaces" or in poem XV of the *Natural History* series serve?

4. One reviewer stated that Chiasson will "modulate from high style to cool colloquialisms and give witty and sensuous embodiment to matters that in other hands would seem abstract or arcane." (The Guardian, June 3, 2006) Can you find examples of these colloquialisms? Does the juxtaposition of the classic and the modern work for the reader?
5. In a letter archive at <http://poetrymagazine.org/letters/archive/1004.html> Chiasson himself posits: "Can we stop arguing over modernism and post-modernism, the academic and the dopey, the raw and the cooked, etc., and please arrive at new questions, interesting and probing enough to fasten the judgments that result to their objects?" How does this question relate to Chiasson's own approach to poetry?
6. Pliny the Elder said "Nature is eternal and sacred and harmonious, but it leaves a wide margin for the emergence of inexplicable prodigious phenomena." Italo Calvino asks, "What general conclusion ought we to draw from this? That we are concerned with a monstrous order entirely composed of exceptions to the rule? Or else a set of rules so

complex it eludes our understanding?” (“Man, the sky and the elephant” pp. 315-330 from *The uses of literature* by Italo Calvino, Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, New York, 1986.)

How do these questions relate to Chiasson’s series of 24 poems inspired by Pliny’s *Historia Naturalis*?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Obtain a copy of the poem titled “West-running brook” by Robert Frost. Share it with the group and discuss Chiasson’s choice to use Frost’s line “As if regret were in it and were sacred” in his poem titled “Poem beginning with a line from Frost.” Does Chiasson’s poem in any other way reference the Frost poem? What are the similarities/differences?
2. Pliny the Elder’s *Natural History* also inspired Paul Zelinsky to write a children’s picture book titled “The Lion and the Stoat” available at your local library. Share the picture book with your group and use it as inspiration to craft poems.
3. For the fearful budding poets, try using magnetic poetry kits as a starting point or cut words and phrases from magazines and place them in a large bowl. Grab a handful and the resulting poem must be a combination of the word bowl phrases and your own.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Excerpted from Randomhouse.com

Dan Chiasson was born in Burlington, Vermont, and was educated at Amherst College and Harvard University, where he completed a Ph.D. in English. His first book of poems, *The Afterlife of Objects*, appeared in 2002. A widely published literary critic, Chiasson is the author of *One Kind of Everything: Poem and Person in Contemporary America*. He is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize and a Whiting Writers’ Award, and teaches at Amherst and Wellesley colleges. He lives in Sherborn, Massachusetts.

HELPFUL LINKS:

On Pliny:

<http://penelope.uchicago.edu/holland/index.html> English ebook version of *Historia Naturalis*

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pliny%27s_Natural_History Background information on Pliny and *Natural History* compiled for the Wikipedia.

Of general use:

<http://www.poets.org> -the Academy of American Poets – in particular, the Poetry Book Club page at <http://www.poets.org/page.php/prmID/44> is a great meeting place for poetry

book groups. It has suggestions on how to begin a poetry book club, tips on how to read a poem, reading guides and reading lists by contemporary poets.

<http://www.favoritepoem.org> – The Favorite Poem Project -- Robert Pinsky, the 39th [Poet Laureate](#) of the United States, founded the Favorite Poem Project shortly after the Library of Congress appointed him to the post in 1997. Since its launch, the Favorite Poem Project has been dedicated to celebrating, documenting and promoting poetry's role in Americans' lives.

<http://www.english.emory.edu/classes/Handbook/Handbook.html> A Handbook of Terms for Discussing Poetry that was compiled by Professor Harry Rusche and his students at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia.

<http://www.writenet.org/poetschat/poetschat.html> -- Poets Chat - Poets on Poetry – Interviews with poets about their poems their poetics and their ideas on how to teach poetry to students in grades K-12. Past interviews have included: Philip Levine, Lorenzo Thomas, Jack Collom and Robert Pinsky.

<http://www.theotherpages.org/poems> Poets' Corner – This is a text resource containing thousands of poems obscure and familiar. Works range from medieval ballads in Middle English to traditional ballads, popular songs of centuries past, and interpretations of American Indian chants. There are single stanzas or entire books. The majority of the poems are pre-1923 because of copyright issues but there are some modern entries for which the site has explicit permission to use. The Suggestions for Further reading include modern poems and the indices include Author/Title/First Line and Subject index files.

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry> -- The Library of Congress Website includes information about the most recent selection for Poet Laureate, New Hampshire's own Donald Hall, a featured poetry webcast and a fun project called Poetry 180 – a poem a day for American high schools. Billy Collins, former poet laureate, selected 180 poems for each of the 180 school days. He selected poems with high school students in mind -- and the result is a very appealing blend of the new and old, very approachable and fun for students.



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