

Oubliette

by Peter Richards

Verse Press

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Peter Richards' first book, *Oubliette*, is full of sensual poems that thoughtfully regard the conditions of human experience. The characters in them reckon with loss, tragedy, and the passage of time. The writing is focused, careful, concretely emotional, and syntactically playful. The first poem, "Remainder," begins, "I am not broken as they envision, am not partial, / porous, nor will I grind into hopes pestle held." It is a small victory for the speaker, already setting up an essential conflict of I-against-they from which all the characters in the book must forge a conception of their place in the world.

The action of bending is an important one for Richards. The characters are unwilling to be controlled by the world; they allow it to bend for them, or they bend to it by choice. In "The Blue Nest," Richards writes, "This is what it's like when I bend—/ when I blur my eyes and wiggle my tongue/ slow and soft along the roots." In "My Death Bed of Flowers" he writes, "I bend for the petal that's me. / Find each petal bending for me...It tickles, this hill. This sprinkle of flowers. / This all-along-a-hill snow bending for me."

Always in *Oubliette*, it is words that have the most power to inflict tragedy and shape our understanding of the physical world. In "This is the Color" Richards writes, "And this knife carving the word *Love*. / Found in the pockets of every dead soldier, / nothing one word will not do to another." In "The Moon is a Moon" language has the power to lessen the moon: "What is it about the moon that makes it fall onto so many pages. / Hauled down by eyes netted together."

A wonderful logic runs through the poems in *Oubliette*, turning time into poetry while always making clear that poetry is bound to paper the way people are bound to the world. The range of emotion is deep and full, and these poems are not easily forgotten.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Many of the poems in *Oubliette* deal with fear. In the first poem, “Remainder,” Richards writes, “I sometimes fear I am deathless--/ fear from now on I’ll serve as the points/ upon which various and misguided winds/ can agree.” How do the different instances of fear in “Remainder” resonate with the way God is represented in the book?
2. The poem “This is the Color,” ends with the line, “Nothing one word will not do to another.” In what ways are words dangerous in *Oubliette*?
3. What role do birds play in *Oubliette*?

ACTIVITIES:

Think about the poem “The Bird Maker’s Last.” Try writing a poem in which you make or build something living. How does this kind of creation relate to building objects like homes or furniture?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Peter Richards was born in Urbana, Illinois in 1967. He is the author of *Oubliette* and *Nude Siren*, both published by Verse Press. He has won the Academy of American Poets Prize and the John Logan award. He has also received an Iowa Arts Fellowship and a Massachusetts Cultural Council Artist Grant in Poetry. He lives in Somerville, Massachusetts and teaches at Tufts University.



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