

Republic of Poetry

by Martín Espada

W.W. Norton

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

In July 2004, Martín Espada traveled to Chile to participate in the celebration of the Neruda Centenary. Writing in *Ploughshares* on his return, he reflected, “We had entered the Republic of Poetry. Restaurants used Neruda’s odes for recipes, and proudly announced this fact on the menu. Radio call-in shows debated the merits of political poetry versus love poetry. There were séances to communicate with poet-spirits. A group of young poets, called Cassagrande, who once rented a helicopter and bombarded the national palace in Santiago with poems on bookmarks, was plotting to commit the same act in Guernica. A security guard at the Santiago airport discovered that I was a poet and wouldn’t let me through the line until I recited a poem for her.

“More tellingly, the families of the disappeared—those imprisoned and murdered by the Pinochet regime—staged a demonstration at Neruda’s tomb in the midst of the celebration, demanding to know the fate of their loved ones and calling for the killers to be punished. Of course they should bring their appeal for justice to the grave of a poet. For these citizens of the Republic of Poetry, it made perfect sense.”*

These images and themes find their way into Espada’s eighth collection of poems, in which the poet both celebrates the transcendent power of poetry and decries the political atrocities committed in Chile and other parts of the world. Divided into three sections, the volume recalls the voices of conscientious objectors, disgraced dictators, and the “disappeared” as well as poets Pablo Neruda, Julia de Burgos, and Robert Creeley.

As reviewer Ariel Dorfman wrote about *The Republic of Poetry*, “What a tender, marvelous collection. First, that broken, glorious journey into the redemptive heart of my Chile, and then, as if that had not been enough, the many gates of epiphanies and sorrows being opened again and again, over and over.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. In his poems, Martín Espada speaks on behalf of the exploited and the disenfranchised. Do you believe that poets have a moral obligation to write about the

political and economic struggles of the common man? How do you explain the Latino tradition of political poetry?

2. What do you think of the artwork on the cover of *The Republic of Poetry*? Does it adequately reflect Martín Espada's poems? If you were the book's designer, what image would you have put on the cover?
3. Look at "The Republic of Poetry," "Soldiers in the Garden," and "The Poet's Coat." How does Espada depict the uses of poetry? How has poetry been a force in your own life?
4. The title poem is a utopian vision of a culture in which poets and poetry are celebrated. Using the title poem as inspiration, write your own stanza about the Republic of Poetry.
5. After visiting Walt Whitman's house in Camden, New Jersey, Espada wrote, "Pablo would have been shocked. Compared to Neruda's house at Isla Negra—an astonishing museum and a national treasure—Whitman's house is spare and solitary, overlooking a prison across the street."** How do you account for Chile's vastly different treatment of Neruda?
6. Espada uses striking visual comparisons—"corpses piled like laundry," "the honeycomb of his lungs," "lips sewn up by the seamstress grief." Find other examples of effective metaphors.
7. Several poems—among them, "Black Islands," "The Caves of Camuy," and "You Got a Song, Man"—are highly personal in nature. Do you prefer Espada's private insights or his political ones?

**"Introduction," *Ploughshares*, Spring 2005 (issue edited by Martín Espada), page 7.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

The Republic of Poetry is Martín Espada's eighth collection of poems. He is also an essayist, editor, and translator. Born into an intensely political Puerto Rican family in Brooklyn in 1957, Espada participated in the Civil Rights Movement during his early years. He went on to attain a B.A. in history from the University of Wisconsin and a J.D. in law from Northeastern University. Early in his career, he worked as a tenants' rights lawyer in Boston. In 1982, he published his first book of political poems, *The Immigrant Iceboy's Bolero*, which featured photographs by his father.

Espada's previous collection, *Alabanza: New and Selected Poems 1982-2002*, received the Paterson Award for Sustained Literary Achievement and was named an American Library Association Notable Book of the Year. An earlier volume, *Imagine the Angels of Bread*, won an American Book Award. Espada has received both a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship and a PEN/Revson Fellowship.

Since 1993, Espada has been a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where he teaches creative writing and the life and works of Pablo Neruda. He was recently named the first Poet Laureate of Northampton, Massachusetts.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Poems and biography of Martín Espada on the Modern American Poetry website (University of Montana): http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/espada/espada.htm

Poets Against War website: <http://www.poetsagainstar.net>

Norton Poets Online: <http://www.nortonpoets.com/espadam.htm>



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