

Trouble in Mind

Poems by Lucie Brock-Broido

Alfred A. Knopf

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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Hingham Public Library, Hingham, MA

Massachusetts
Award Winner
2005



SUMMARY:

There is a rich literary tradition of presenting the harsh realities of life as an underlying darkness, vast and threatening, and no more than a hairsbreadth away from our glossy-eyed perception of life. This history is filled with stories that carry unsuspecting readers into the dark, only to let them wallow there and, perhaps, learn a lesson of gratitude, grasp the inevitability of fate, or glimpse the unanswerable whims of the cosmos. Seldom do artists succumb entirely to the darkness, but hold fast to a lifeline and skate upon the edge. The words of Lucie Brock-Broido are her lifeline, painting images and thoughts on hallways of glass. We see the beauty of her phrases up close, clear, strong and lyrical, while the mystery of her despair lingers just beyond. She knows that “Perhaps it isn’t possible to say these things / Out loud without the noir / of ardor and its pain-spoken elegance” but, as in all things, the answer lies in the effort. She does not bother with an abstract perception of the darkness beneath the act of living, for the true and common experiences of loss, longing and heartache are so much more potent due to our shared understanding. But the world is also magic to Brock-Broido:

A sack of bees

Like a cataract
Opens, tangling its skein, filling the room

With the heavy machinery
Of honey and anatomies, and light.

Her sense of imagery and language is astonishing. She fills the page with the only true tools of the poet: questions, answers and observations. It is up to the reader to determine the connection of each to the world of her poems, and to the world of us all.

In “Of the Finished World” she writes, “How have I lived here so long?” The answer – for Brock-Broido and the reader, alike – may be simple. Through the delicate music of her words and the exacting truths behind them, she allows the reader to rise or sink into the possible, all the while viewing the “noir of ardor” from a safe enough distance. The “heavy machinery” of the bees is very real, but so is the honey and light.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Nearly all the poems in *Trouble in Mind* contain some reference to an element of nature, however small. Considering that her poems take their context from a wide variety of sources, why do you think Brock-Broido consistently employs these brief images of the natural world?
2. Consider the purpose of poetry. The poem “Morgue Near Heaven” is a consideration of death and the personal separation it brings. *Trouble in Mind* contains several poems dealing with this subject. How is poetry able to express these thoughts and emotions differently than other art forms? Why does written language, specifically, remain such a potent communicator of mystery and loss?

POETRY EXERCISES:

1. Brock-Broido uses language in a very particular way, building her poems word by word, image by image. Thoughts are expressed not simply through the poem as a whole, but by each individual word and its interaction with those around it. Choose a particular poem, give it a careful reading out loud, and summarize it in your own words. Now re-examine the poem. How closely are the poet’s words wedded to her meaning?
2. Many poets use loftier words and phrases to create their poems, and some readers find those poems less accessible. Brock-Broido’s word choice is relatively common, but it is the way in which she strings her words together that displays her true craft and artistry. For a similar exercise, create a theme or context for your own poem, written in common or vernacular language, and play with the words in order to turn a common statement or phrase into an uncommon phrase of expression. Keep playing, and keep writing.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Lucie Brock-Broido was born and raised in Pittsburgh. She received her B.A. and her M.A. from Johns Hopkins University, and her M.F.A. from Columbia University. Her books of poetry include *Trouble in Mind* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), *The Master Letters* (1995), and *A Hunger* (1988). Her awards and honors include the Witter-Bynner prize of Poetry, the Harvard Phi Beta Kappa Teaching Award, the Jerome J. Shestack Poetry Prize from *American Poetry Review*, two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, and a Guggenheim fellowship.

Brock-Broido has taught at Bennington College, Princeton University, and at Harvard University. She is now the director of poetry in the Writing Division in the School of the Arts at Columbia University, and divides her time between New York City and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

HELPFUL LINKS:

“About the Author” taken from the Academy of American Poets website which also provides other external links for further reading of this author:

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/1113>

This is the link to Alfred A. Knopf’s page for *Trouble in Mind*:

<http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9781400040834>

If you’d like to read a little more poetry – or read about poetry – try either of these links for some great collections that provide a wide variety of poetry styles and voices.

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/>

This is the Poetry 180 project, created by Billy Collins, Former Poet Laureate of the United States (2001-2003). It was designed to attract high school students to poetry, but the poems included are universal, accessible and excellent reading for all ages.

<http://www.poetry.com/>

Billing itself as “The International Library of Poetry,” this site is a great storehouse of poems by authors of fame and almost-fortune, as well as the writings of “amateur” poets who post their own work on the site. Lots of fun, lots of information, and lots of poetry!



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