

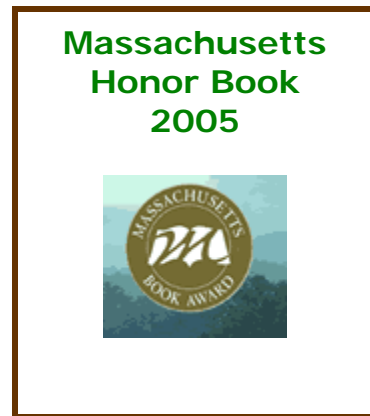
The Unsubscriber

by Bill Knott

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Over the last four decades, beginning with his collection *The Naomi Poems, Book One; Corpse and Beans, by Saint Geraud (1940 - 1966)*, poet Bill Knott has written and published several highly acclaimed volumes of poetry, achieving near-cult status with his many devoted admirers. The poems in this collection well represent the versatility of his poetic technique and tone. It is all here: the lyric, comic, romantic, irreverent, and surreal; the reasoned diatribe as well as the ode to despair. Bill Knott teaches poetry and writing at Emerson College in Boston, Massachusetts.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. If you were assembling the poems for this collection, would you choose the poem "The Unsubscriber" for the title poem? Why or why not? If not, which poem would you choose to lead the rest?
2. In the poem, "A Lesson from the Orphanage," what is the orphanage of the poem? Who lives there? Who does not?
3. Read "Poem" on page 25. How would you imagine this poem was composed? Does it work as a poem for you? Would you say it fits the following definition of "surrealism"?

"a style of art and literature. . . stressing the subconscious or nonrational significance of imagery arrived at by automatism or the exploitation of chance effects, unexpected juxtapositions, etc." (from *Random House Webster's College Dictionary*)

4. One of the longer poems in the collection is "Relics with Old Blue Medicine-type Bottle: To X," which features a sketchy, irregular almost-rhyme scheme. Does the imperfection of the rhyme detract from or add to the overall effect of this poem, in which the unearthed blue bottle serves as a focal point for musings on the start of a new relationship. How would you evaluate the potential for the relationship, based on the imagery of the poem?

5. The poem "The Singular" is written in "nonasyllabics." What are nonasyllabics? What other poetic form does the poem call to mind? Knott is an admirer of the work of Sylvia Plath. Compare his nonasyllabics to her poem "Metaphors." How significant is the number nine to the sense of Plath's poem? Knott's?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Read Knott's poem, "Paradise." Then find a volume of poetry-in-translation such as he describes, with the original on one side and the translation facing. Do you share Knott's view that "the words of the real poem give it that glow. . . .?"
2. As a group, write a surrealist poem or poems. Starting at the top of one or more sheets of paper, have each person in the group take a turn writing an original line of poetry or prose on the page, then fold over the paper just enough to hide the text before passing on to the next contributor. You can have just one page going around, or have each person start a page and pass it on, until everyone has added one line to each paper. Unfold the finished "poem" or "poems" and read aloud.
3. Knott frequently uses a particular form of poetry, for example the sonnet (e.g., "The Unsubscriber," and "Extended"). Try your own hand at a sonnet, or one of Knott's other forms, such as a poem in hendecasyllabics (basically, eleven syllables per line - see a poetry glossary for more specifics). Or bring along for discussion examples of one or more of these forms by other poets.
4. Imagine that you are creating this discussion/activity guide. Which poems do you most want to discuss? What questions do you wish were included in the guide? What activities? Write them down, and propose them to the group.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Bill Knott is the author of ten previous volumes of poetry, including his groundbreaking first book, *The Naomi Poems* (1968), and *Laugh at the End of the World: Collected Comic Poems 1969-1999*. He is an associate professor at Emerson College.

Bill Knott comments: I consider my work to fall within the minimalist or imagist tradition. My poems are rarely longer than ten-twenty lines. The hermeticist poets--Mallarmé, Ungaretti, Bonnefoy, etc.--have been lasting influences. The Greek anthology and Japanese haikuists, like Issa and Bash are sources for me. In English I revere Milton, Matthew Arnold, and Hardy. Larkin is better than any of his American contemporaries, and I admire poets like Carol Ann Duffy and Robert Wells. I would rather be British. I loathe what Harold Bloom calls the American religion, that is, the Emersonian quest.

"Bill Knott." *Contemporary Poets*, 7th ed. St. James Press, 2001. Reproduced in *Biography Resource Center*. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Thomson Gale. 2005. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

SUGGESTED RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING:

Breton, Andre. *Manifestoes of Surrealism*. Translated from the French by Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969.

Codrescu, Andrei, ed. *American Poetry Since 1970: Up Late*. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1990.

Drabble, Margaret, ed. *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Knott, Bill. *The Naomi Poems, Book One; Corpse and Beans, by Saint Geraud (1940 - 1966)*. Big Table Series of Younger Poets, v. 1. Chicago: Follett Pub. Co., 1968.

Ochester, Ed, and Peter Oresick, eds. *Pittsburgh Book of Contemporary American Poetry*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1993.

Perrine, Lawrence, and Thomas R. Arp. *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1992.

HELPFUL LINKS:

At the time of this writing, there are a number of interesting web articles on Bill Knott and his work. An Internet search on "Bill Knott" can lead you to several, or you might try the following:

"Bill Knott: No Man is an Eyelid (a wandering fan's notes)" by Klipschutz:
<http://www.pith.net/pith5-00/eyelid.htm>

"An Interview with Bill Knott" by Adam Travis:
http://www.bookslut.com/features/2005_02_004302.php

"Knotty, Knotty Boy" by Richard Hell: <http://www.richardhell.com/knott.html>

"My Mentor, Bill Knott": <http://www.lighthousewriters.com/newslett/knott.htm>

Many websites offer glossaries of poetic terms, including the following:
http://www.poetsgraves.co.uk/glossary_of_poetic_terms.htm



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