

Zeppo's First Wife
New and Selected Poems

by Gail Mazur

University of Chicago Press

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

Zeppo's First Wife contains poems drawn from four earlier books along with 22 new pieces. The title poem is a new work, chronicling not only a long lost familial connection to the youngest Marx brother, but that sense of hidden depth and historical impermanence that tracks us all. Because the collection covers 30 years of poetry, the reader is fortunate to find the full breadth of Mazur's gifts of communication through beautifully descriptive and insightful conversation. It is perhaps superfluous to mention her 1978 poem "Baseball," as it has appeared so often and is so well known, but its inclusion as the end cap to this collection could not be more perfect.

Mazur reads as if she is the observational eye of the world. There is no aspect of this human condition that has avoided the clear-eyed, exploratory touch of her words. In "Bluebonnets," the narrator finds herself and her brother in a Texas meadow filled with the delicate flowers, but it is not enough to simply see them, they must walk through the meadow, lay themselves down, and let their presence be the only proof of the moment:

We took no pictures, we knew no camera
could fathom that blue. I brushed
the soft spikes, I fingered lightly

the delicate earthly petals, I thought,
This is what my hands do well
isn't it, touch things about to vanish.

Yes, this is what she does well. Mindful of the fields in which she travels, ever careful to touch with her hands and her words the transient intricacies of life, Gail Mazur has captured the honest, open truth of the everyday into an oddly uncommon form – poetry that avoids the often trod paths of world-weary cynicism on the one hand and light-hearted witticism on the other. She brings to the reader a middle path, if you will, blending all the joy, chaos, and uncertainty of life into a road that is wide and clear, leading us all straight back to our own hearts and minds.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Several of Mazur's poems deal with the *unfinished*. "To Whoever May Be Concerned:" (p. 35), "Five Poems Entitled "Questions" (53), "Wakeful before Tests" (104), are excellent examples. All of life, one can say, is unfinished, but what is it about poems concerning questions of the future and the unknown that makes for such memorable work? Read "Five Poems..." and not only try to answer the questions for the poet and for yourself, but write your own poem with a first line of "What is my purpose in life" and see if the process of writing draws you closer to an answer.
2. It is often a mistake to believe all poems to be autobiographical, but many of Mazur's poems are about herself and her family. In the beautiful "I Wish I Want I Need," (68), she speaks of her 80 year old mother and moments of realization. In "Family Plot" (202), she writes an evocative and touching memorial to her father while visiting his grave. Mazur, like many poets, has written about family and friends throughout her career. Since poetry is such a primal and emotional medium, what effects do you think this kind of personal intimacy laid bare for strangers has on the *subjects* of these kinds of poems?
3. The poem "Baseball" (293) begins with this line: "The game of baseball is not a metaphor..." Mazur's poem goes on to bear this statement out, but why have so many writers used baseball as a metaphor over the years? Is it realistic or idealistic to compare life to a game? Why is metaphor such a powerful tool in poetry?
4. Many of Mazur's poems feel as if they are written in a very present tense. Pieces like "Three Provincetown Mornings" (137) speak of walks just taken or moments just lived. Others carry memories of childhood or recount now distant days, such as "Elementary Education" (252), "Then" (125), and "Queenie" (13). Think about the immediacy of life and how memories can change with time. Does the inherent imperfection of memory alter a poet's perspective? Do you think it is more likely for a poet to unintentionally make their memories appear happier or darker? Do you think a poem about a very recent experience, say a walk in the woods the morning the poem was composed, would be much different in tone and content if the poet waited a few weeks, or even years?
5. Gail Mazur's poems are often about simple, yet important aspects of human life. Would you read a 300 page novel about simple aspects of human life? Would a series of 2-hour films about simple and poignant observations on life be as engaging as a series of poems on the exact same themes? Why, or why not? Why do people read poetry? What are the unique aspects of the form that can make its emotional content so powerful?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Gail Mazur is the author of four books of poems: *Nightfire*, *The Pose of Happiness*, *The Common*, and *They Can't Take That Away from Me*. Her poems have been anthologized widely, including Best American Poetry of 1995, The Pushcart Anthology, The

Ploughshares Poetry Reader, and *New American Poets of the '90's* (Godine). She has written essays and reviews for *Poetry*, *The Boston Globe*, *The Boston Phoenix*, and *The Boston Review*. She is the founding director of the Blacksmith House Poetry Center in Cambridge and was the 1996-97 Bunting Institute's Fellow in poetry. Mazur has taught at the University of Houston Graduate Program in Writing, Harvard University Extension School's Graduate Writing Program, University of Massachusetts-Boston, Wellesley College, and in the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown's summer program and is currently Writer-in-Residence at Emerson College. Mazur is a member of the executive board of PEN New England, a member of the Writing Committee of the Fine Arts Work Center, and on the editorial boards of several literary magazines.

“About the Author” taken from the Ploughshares website. This website also features links to numerous articles written by or about the author:

<http://www.pshares.org/Authors/authorDetails.cfm?prmAuthorID=993>

This is the link to The University of Chicago Press' page for *Zeppo's First Wife*.

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/hfs.cgi/00/161248.ctl>

HELPFUL LINKS:

If you'd like to read more poetry, or read *about* poetry, try either of these links for some great resources that provide a wide variety of poetry styles and voices.

<http://www.poets.org/> A poetry resource sponsored by the Academy of American Poets, the “Academy was founded in 1934 to support American poets at all stages of their careers and to foster the appreciation of contemporary poetry.”

<http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/> 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.pshares.org/> The main page for Ploughshares: the Literary Journal at Emerson College, providing access to articles, forums, and announcements of readings in the area, among other features.



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