

Bewitched Playground

by David Rivard

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A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

In 2000, David Rivard wrote *Bewitched Playground*, a book of lyric poems about the birth of his daughter. As many know, there is nothing simple about having a child, and this book, from the hands of a talented poet, is not a simple work. *Bewitched Playground* takes the reader into the heart of this transforming experience, illuminating the many ways one's perception of the world changes with parenthood.

Rivard seems to notice everything. As he writes in the title poem, "But all have turned instead to watch this child/ a girl my daughter Simone/ an astute migrant/ skimming the stream of days." In a similar way, the poet captures the more mundane moments and gives them meaning and originality. In "My Education on Earth," improperly planted bulbs imply that, "Day may have been dug badly, / growing downward now/ apparently forever." In "Not Guilty," an ordinary apple is given extra significance as an expression of his wish to sing like Robert Johnson, "With the shocked & seeded/ sweetness of an apple/ split open by a meat cleaver."

Music plays an important role in Rivard's life and work. In "America," he writes, "I put the music on low/ only to initiate my daughter/ into the religion of Bob Dylan." "Nice Work If You Can Get It" takes its title from the popular song by Gershwin, and it functions rhythmically, along with the tactile, erotic description of bodies in contact. The poems are stronger still when they shift to the point of view of the child, when Rivard imagines her thoughts, as he does in "Question for the Office of Recycling." In one telling section of this poem, he quotes his daughter from the breakfast table asking, "And away be birds dad, blowing/ careful don't they, don't they, how far?" It is this blowing, this wind, that ties all the moments of the book together. The wind, rivers, and even brooms—all have the capability to sweep the days away, to initiate the passage of time. Perhaps most importantly, time initiates growing up, both for the poet and for his daughter.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. The final poem in *Bewitched Playground* ends with, “Don’t rest, river.” How do rivers play metaphorically in this book?
1. Many of the poems deal directly with Rivard’s feelings about his daughter and about what it means to have a child. These are some of the most beautiful moments in the book. What relation do you think the presence of the child has to the spirit of questioning in *Bewitched Playground*?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Some of the poems in this book are presented as questions to specific people or things: “Question for the Student,” “Question for the Magic Hour,” etc. Think of a question that you desperately want answered and try writing a poem about it.
1. In the poem “America,” Rivard plays Bob Dylan while holding his daughter in the middle of the night. He describes trying to instill that part of himself in her. Imagine you were in Rivard’s situation: what music would you play? Try writing a poem about this.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Bewitched Playground is David Rivard’s third book of poems. His first book, *Torque*, was published in 1987 and won the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize. His second book, *Wise Poison*, won the James Laughlin Award of The Academy of American Poets. He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Arts Foundation, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. He has won a Pushcart Prize. Poetry editor of the *Harvard Review*, Rivard teaches at Tufts University and in the M.F.A. in Writing Program at Vermont College. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts with his wife and daughter.

HELPFUL LINKS:

<http://www.poets.org/poets/poets.cfm?prmID=44> : Website of the Academy of American Poets. Includes a poem and his James Laughlin Award citation.



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