

Blind Huber

by Nick Flynn

Graywolf Press

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

In 1792, after 50 years of research, investigation and obsession, François Huber published *Nouvelles Observations sur les Abeilles*, a landmark work that remains the cornerstone of our scientific knowledge about the life of the honey bee. What made Huber particularly interesting, however, is that he was completely blind due to a disease he contracted when he was fifteen. With the assistance of his wife, Marie Aimée Lullin, and especially his servant, François Burnens, Huber produced a core of knowledge about the honey bee that is still considered fundamental work in the field.

In 2002, Nick Flynn published *Blind Huber*, a book of poetry loosely based on François Huber's obsessive quest to study the honey bee. In an amazing work of perception and imagination, Flynn writes from the viewpoint of Huber, his assistant Burnens, and the bees, themselves. It is perhaps within the poems of the bees that Flynn's poetry finds its most sincere beauty. We are privy to the ponderings of the Queen, the drone, the worker setting out to forage "After this seven-/month slumber, honey-stupored/& warm." The reader feels as if these are the *actual words* of the bees; the eloquence of their lives, movements and biology transformed into flowing poetry we humans can understand.

Yet there is just as much beauty in the studies and thoughts of François Huber. Scattered throughout Flynn's collection, in almost a natural back and forth between bee and Huber, his impassioned observations frame the musings of the observed. Ever aware of his blindness, Flynn creates a man who consumes knowledge through his remaining four senses. In the poem "Blind Huber (xii)," Huber transforms a room into a hive by placing honeycombs along the walls. He then sits in the middle and waits for the comb to grow, to close in, to make the man part of the hive: "...I wanted to see/if the hive moved,/ & it did,/ but not as much as I had hoped." In a simple but mysterious way, it would seem Nick Flynn was born to put the mind of François Huber and his bees into poetry.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Try to imagine the effort and determination involved in 50 years of studying bee hives, or anything for that matter, when you can never actually see – with your own eyes – what you are studying. How do you think this affected Huber's results, or his relationship with Burnens and his wife? Can you relate to that kind of determination? Do you feel that kind of intensity for some aspect of your life? Is there a way to involve that kind of effort or level of fascination into your own life?
2. Nick Flynn does an amazing job of bringing the thoughts and actions of the bees to life. Did you feel a connection with his poetry? Is it believable that bees could speak so elegantly about their lives? Did the premise that we are reading the thoughts of the bees push you away from the poems, or did it draw you in? Did the premise that we are reading the imagined thoughts of François Huber push you away or draw you in? Does reading *Blind Huber* make you want to read more poetry? If not, why?

ACTIVITIES:

You don't have to consider yourself a poet to write poetry. One of the hardest things about writing a poem can be the initial idea of what to write about. Some poets have spent weeks, months, or even years in pursuit of inspiration for a single poem, let alone an entire work of poetry like Nick Flynn's *Blind Huber*. So to avoid the strain of forced inspiration, use the exercises below to put a few words on paper. Try for at least a dozen lines. Don't worry about style, don't be critical of yourself, and remember that you don't always have to rhyme. It could be said that every act of the universe can be seen as a poem, or poetic. If this is the case, we are surrounded by poetry at all times. Pick up a pen or pencil, or sit yourself in front of the keyboard, and try one or all of these exercises.

1. Write a poem from the point of view of any kind of animal or insect. Try to stay true to issues such as environment or habits. Play with onomatopoeia if you like (words that sound like what they are: *buzz, whirr, moo*, etc.)
2. Write a poem from the point of view of an inanimate object, such as a rock or a chair. How would it describe itself? How would it feel about its life or function? Try the point of view of an ocean, a cloud, or a puddle filling with rain.
3. Write a poem from the point of view of an historical person of note, as Flynn did with François Huber. Or if you'd like to try something a little more personal, write about a grandparent, a family member, or someone who's played a part in your life.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Nick Flynn's first book of poems, *Some Ether*, won the inaugural PEN/Joyce Osterweil Award, the Larry Levis Prize from Virginia Commonwealth University, and was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize. He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim and Witter Bynner Foundations, as well as the Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship. For many years he worked as a ship's captain, as an electrician, as a caseworker with homeless adults, and as an educator, primarily for Columbia University's Writing Project, primarily in New York City public schools. These various occupations overlapped occasionally. Currently he splits his time between Brooklyn, New York, and Provincetown, Massachusetts.

View the [Graywolf Press](#) page for Flynn's book.

HELPFUL LINKS:

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!

<http://www.poets.org>

The homepage for the Academy of American Poets.



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