

Breathing Room

by Peter Davison

Knopf

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Prepared by Seth Landman
Master's Candidate; MFA program
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Massachusetts
Award Winner
2001



SUMMARY:

Peter Davison's *Breathing Room* takes as its subject that most autonomic of human activities: breath. As the poet tells us in the forward to his book, "Poetry composes, not as modern Western music often does, for an instrument or for an orchestra or recording device, but for the human breath." Form, in this work, is firmly shaped to meaning. The poems are meant to have room to breathe, to inhabit just a portion of the space on the page, and to be based on the patterns of breathing.

Davison's collection is organized into sections that trace the path of life from youth to old age and beyond. Many of the poems concern that moment when a living being ceases to draw breath. In the poem "Steep," he imagines a path, functioning as both a literal path in the woods and his path through life. The speaker wonders, "*Legs, will you carry me past the timberline, / limping, exhausted, nearing the confine/ where breathing is the ultimate event?*"

Breathing Room is also concerned with man's place in the natural world. In "Like No Other," the poet's road crosses the path of a fox, inspiring the poet to reflect on the intersection of these two paths. We see the fox go back to her lair, only slightly aware of the presence of man, but for Davison the moment is deeply felt. He does not concern himself with his own path, only with the certainty that the path of the fox leads back into the woods. As the fox passes, aware and unaware of him, he senses that he is the one out of place, the one for whom this is a moment of significance. A similar moment occurs in "Walking Through the Big Dig." In an environment of severe disruption and constantly shifting infrastructure, Davison is simply moving through. It is only when a hearse passes, causing the poet to remove his cap and cover his heart, that we feel the poem breathe again – and, for just a moment, we are reminded of humanity in an unfamiliar world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How does Davison use form and rhythm to create “room to breathe?” Is he successful?
2. How do the book’s five sections provide a framework for his ideas, specifically about getting older?
3. In what ways do “Prayer to the Verb” and “Getting Over Robert Frost” concern the writing process? How do these poems help the poet express his reasons for choosing this craft?
4. The first and last poems in the collection are titled “No Escape.” They are both the same poem, with the second occurrence in italics. Does this mean that the search for “Breathing Room” was a failure? What does it mean for poetry, and for human existence, that there is no escape? In what ways is this notion a positive one, rather than negative?

ACTIVITIES:

1. Try writing a poem using the style that Davison employs in “Breathing Room.” Do you find this mode of writing confining or liberating creatively?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Peter Davison was born in New York City in 1928, the son of the poet Edward Davison. In 1963 his first book, *The Breaking of the Day*, was the Yale Series of Younger Poets selection. He has written ten books of poems in all, a memoir titled *Half Remembered*, a book of literary essays, *One of the Dangerous Trades*, and *The Fading Smile*, a narrative of literary history. A book editor for Atlantic Monthly Press (1956-1985) and Houghton Mifflin (1985-1998), he is currently the poetry editor for *The Atlantic Monthly*. He is married to the architect Joan E. Goody, and lives in Boston and Gloucester, Massachusetts.

HELPFUL LINKS:

For more information on Peter Davison, try this website:

<http://www.csmonitor.com/atcsmonitor/specials/poetry/p-davison.html>

A Christian Science Monitor website, includes audio of Davison reading his own work, as well as many interview questions.



The Massachusetts Book Awards are a program of the Massachusetts Center for the Book, the Commonwealth Affiliate of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress. Visit us on the web at www.massbook.org.

Copyright © 2004 Massachusetts Center for the Book