

# *Middle Earth*

by Henri Cole

Graywolf Press

## A Reading and Discussion Guide

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### SUMMARY:

*Excerpted from* "Henri Cole's poetry pierces, and the self is a battleground" by Karl Kirchwey. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (online), January 18, 2004, <http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/entertainment/books/7726494.htm?1c>

The Middle Earth referred to by Henri Cole in the title to his fifth collection of poetry is that described by Auden: "What high immortals do in mirth / Is life and death on Middle Earth." Auden's poem "Under Which Lyre" was the Phi Beta Kappa Poem at Harvard in 1946 and addresses undergraduates who are war veterans. The "life and death" to which Auden refers are thus military; as in Homer, the whims of the gods are played out on the battlefield.

Cole's battlefield is a different one: It is the ground of the self - though the conflicts he describes are no less urgent and violent than those that take place in historical (rather than personal) time and space. The tensions between the dictates of the mind (specifically of conscience, of the Roman Catholicism in which Cole was raised) and those of the body (specifically his homosexuality), and the dangers attending upon the resolution of these tensions in self-hatred, are themes Cole has been exploring with increasing confidence and directness since his first book, *The Marble Queen*, was published in 1986.

In this book, the struggle has liberated him into a lyric voice that is not only authentic, in terms of his own life and interests, but also something completely new in the landscape of contemporary American poetry.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Read Henri Cole's short introductory poem ("Deadheading the geraniums...") aloud. How does it set the tone for the poems that follow?
2. How does the cover art of *Middle Earth* reflect the volume's themes?

3. The collection is organized into three sections. Why? Can you discern a unifying principle for each section?
4. Cole's poems often evoke the serenity and minimalism of Japanese art and literature. Discuss the ways in which particular poems evoke the Orient. Consider Cole's choice of words, images, and lines.
5. Many of the poems discuss separation, solitude, and loneliness. Look at "Snow Moon Flower" (page 48) and reflect on Cole's descriptions of what he terms "aparthood."
6. In the poem "Middle Earth" (page 13), Cole comments that "Desire and disgust get mixed up." How do the poems "Mask" (page 36) and "Blur" (page 50) depict his conflicting feelings of arousal and self-loathing?
7. Cole refers to "the squalor of everyday existence" (page 39) and "all the bloated clottings of a life" (page 20). How do domestic details contribute to his poems?
8. The poet uses many similes and metaphors drawn from the natural world ("I cling like a cicada to the latticework of memory"). Which comparisons do you find most striking or effective?
9. How did Cole's relationships with family members shape him? Look at "Self-Portrait in a Gold Kimono" (page 3), "Powdered Milk" (page 7), and "Radiant Ivory" (page 17).
10. In "Ape House, Berlin Zoo" (page 18), "Pillow Case with Praying Mantis" (page 32), and "Black Camellia" (page 23), Cole speaks directly to his subjects. Do you find this technique effective? Why or why not?

### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION:**

Henri Cole was born in Fukuoka, Japan, in 1956, and raised in Virginia. He has earned degrees from the College of William and Mary (B.A.), the University of Wisconsin (M.A.), and Columbia University (M.F.A.). His volumes of poetry include *Middle Earth* (2003), *The Visible Man* (1998), *The Look of Things* (1995), *The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge* (1989), and *The Marble Queen* (1986).

Cole has received many literary awards, including the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the Berlin Prize of the American Academy in Berlin, the Rome Prize in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Amy Lowell Poetry Traveling Scholarship. He has received fellowships from the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France; the Ingram Merrill Foundation; and the National Endowment for the Arts.

From 1982 until 1988, he served as executive director of the Academy of American Poets. Since then, he has held numerous teaching positions and worked as artist-in-residence at institutions including Brandeis, Columbia, Harvard, and Yale universities, and Reed College. He is currently poet-in-residence at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts.

#### **ADDITIONAL READING:**

##### *About the Author:*

Cole, Henri. "How I Grew." *Borzoi Reader*. (online),  
<http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/authors/cole/poetsonpoetry.html>

Cole, Henri. "What Is American About American Poetry?" *Poetry Society of America* (online), <http://www.poetrysociety.org/cole.html>

##### *About the Book:*

Kirchwey, Karl. "Henri Cole's poetry pierces, and the self is a battleground." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (online), January 18, 2004,  
<http://www.philly.com/mld/inquirer/entertainment/books/7726494.htm?1c>

Klawitter, George. "Middle Earth (Book Review)." *The Antioch Review*. Spring 2004, v62 i2 p372.

Lynch, Doris. "Middle Earth (Book Review)." *Library Journal*, April 15, 2003, v 128 i7 p 89.

Olson, Ray. "Middle Earth (Book Review)." *Booklist*, April 1, 2003, v99 i15 p1366.

##### *About Poetry:*

Hirsch, Edward. *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1999.



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