

*the*  
**POET'S  
HOUSE**

An Essay by Jean Thompson

Questions for Discussion



## AN ESSAY BY JEAN THOMPSON

In James Conrad's great comic novel, *Making Love to the Minor Poets of Chicago*, the poetry is sublime, but the poets are all too human. They scheme and gossip, compete for jobs, fellowships, and awards. They form strategic alliances, envy each other's publications and even each other's apartments. And the biggest prize is the chance to write a poem that will be engraved on the doors of the Yucca Mountain Nuclear Waste Repository. It will be a peculiar kind of literary immortality, measured by the half-life of plutonium. It serves as a fitting device for the absurdities, seductions, betrayals, and high jinks that follow. It's all good fun, because who among us doesn't enjoy seeing the very serious practitioners of literary truth and beauty brought down a peg or two? I'm also remembering very early television, and Ernie Kovacs's sketch comedy character Percy Dovetonsils, who lisped poems while wearing a smoking jacket and fake eyeballs.

If you write, as I have my entire adult life (fiction for me, not poetry), you can find yourself meditating, or brooding, on the disjunctions and contradictions of the writing life. How

literature is both central to our culture and marginalized. How much bloody work can go into even a mediocre or downright bad book, how fickle is fame or recognition of any kind. And how mismatched a great achievement and its ordinary, fallible author can be. Or, as I wrote once in a short story, “There was for every artist the awful moment when they stepped out from behind their splendid creation and revealed the meager, human-sized self that was bound to disappoint by comparison.” Except the artist in the story is a baker, and her creations are pies. A much more transitory medium than that nuclear mountain.

Why write? Why even try? Why put yourself through the exasperation, the effort, often enough thankless, invisible, unrewarded? Forget, for the moment, questions of vanity, fame, money. We have a human need to make words sing. If a piece of writing has ever made you giddy, made you burn or soar, made you think or feel, then you know the urge to take up the sword yourself. And just beyond your hearing, teasing you, leading you on, is the ideal of what you wish to say, and how wonderful it will be once you get it exactly right.

There are those who get it right and those who never do, those whose job it is to sit in judgment, and those whose job it is to resist the judgments. As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.

How did my novel come about? I began to tell myself a story about a group of poets. I chose poets rather than fiction writers, both because poetry is the purer literary art form, and, more important, because I don't write it myself and could hope to

approach it with more objectivity. I wanted to poke fun at my poets, while at the same time taking them absolutely seriously. I wanted to show that even the most difficult and ungainly personalities can produce poems of merit, of genius. (And unpleasant people can produce unpleasant writing; we know this to be true.) A few years back, I took a trip to see migrating sandhill cranes at one of their flyway resting stops in Indiana. After a day spent foraging in farm fields, the cranes, which are huge, prehistoric-looking creatures, gather by the hundreds in an open field, strutting and preening, calling and squawking and flapping their wings in courtship rituals. They resemble nothing so much as a literary cocktail party. Yet once they take flight, cranes can glide for hours.

The characters in my novel's literary flock are all pure inventions, although most of their quirks and traits are borrowed from life. I knew from the outset that there would be a woman poet, accomplished, queenly, with a mystery somewhere in her past. That mystery only took shape as I wrote. It had to do with the sacrifices one makes for love, and for art, and the particular difficulties faced by women artists. I knew I wanted a group of other poets, friends and acolytes, who would gather round her and fill in parts of her story.

I wanted this group to be introduced and observed by someone who was a newcomer and an outsider. Somebody watching the flock of cranes with binoculars and a notebook. My narrator is a young woman with challenges and issues of her own, who falls in love with the poets and with poetry itself. She is, in James Conrad's apt phrase, "the empty vessel politely asking to be filled."

Comedy, like virtue, is its own reward. If my reader laughs half as hard as I do at my own jokes, I will be content. But comedy also implies its opposite, the tragic mask. Writers are censored, silenced, exiled, jailed, and executed because they have power, and because that power can threaten. Anna Akhmatova memorized her poems and burned the scraps of paper to hide them from the secret police. The dictator of Chile forbade a public funeral for Pablo Neruda; thousands lined the streets in defiance. Amanda Gorman gave us an inaugural poem that rang out like a bell.

Finally, *The Poet's House* is my love letter to Northern California, a place I think of fondly when the Midwest is at its most severe, when we have snow one week and tornadoes the next. Here is my vision: a comfortable old house, and a beautiful garden in lingering afternoon light. Someone is pouring wine, someone is preparing food. Someone is quoting Yeats, someone else, *Alice in Wonderland*. All of us here are writers, by the grace of God. And God is merciful, God is wise. He knows exactly what it is we keep trying to say.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What factors do you think contribute to Carla feeling stuck and unhappy? How much do you think is coming from herself, and how much is due to the people around her? How are the two intertwined? If you have had a phase in your life when you felt stuck, how did you overcome it?
2. What is it about Viridian that speaks so much to Carla?
3. To what extent does social class, or perceived social class, play a role in how Carla is treated by others?
4. What do you think of Viridian's decision(s) in relation to Mathias's work?
5. In what ways does Mathias's relationship with Viridian circumscribe her career and reputation as a poet? Can you think of other relationships between famous artists that influenced the trajectory and reputation of the woman?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

6. What do you think of Viridian's characterization of poetry and talent in this exchange with Carla:

"You think writing poems has something to do with talent? Not much at all. It has to do with pure, stubborn determination to keep doing it, to not be discouraged by the thousand thousand things that are meant to discourage you. Nobody cares if you do it or not. No guarantees that anybody is going to read any of it."

"But that hasn't stopped you."

"Because I have been absolutely selfish about my art. Do you know how hard it is for a woman to be selfish?"

7. Have you ever been to a writers' retreat? If so, did this portrayal match your experience, and in what ways? If not, were you surprised by how Thompson describes it?

8. Carla says she feels "the ache and hunger that can both be awakened and soothed by a poem." How would you describe her ache and hunger? When have you felt this, and with what poem? Was it related to a moment in your life that you can remember?

9. Oscar Blanco says, quoting William Carlos Williams, "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there" (p. 24). What does he mean for Carla and Aaron to take away from this?

10. What do you think of Carla and Aaron's relationship? Do you sense a power imbalance, and if so, why?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

11. Carla's mother tells her, "Women can't get away with things the way men can" (p. 20). Why does she say this to her—what is she hoping to teach her daughter?

12. What did you think of the book's ending? How has Carla changed? What has she discovered about herself? How has Aaron changed?

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**Jean Thompson** is the author of fourteen books of fiction, including the National Book Award finalist *Who Do You Love*, the *New York Times* bestseller *The Year We Left Home*, and the *New York Times* Notable Book *Wide Blue Yonder*. Her work has been published in the *New Yorker*, as well as dozens of other magazines, and anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories* and the *Pushcart Prize*. She has been the recipient of Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, among other accolades, and has taught creative writing at the University of Illinois, Reed College, Northwestern University, and many other colleges and universities. Visit her at [jeanthompsononline.com](http://jeanthompsononline.com).