

Questions For Discussion

When Light Shifts, by Jennifer L Freed. c 2022 Kelsay Books kelsaybooks.com
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General

1. In the first poem of the book, “Leaving,” you learn that the pre-injury mother refinishes furniture. Other poems point to other activities and interests (e.g. in “Thrown” and “Already It’s Time,”) Can you name some of them? What kind of woman was she before her injury? Would you say she is typical of a woman her age and generation?
2. As with other brain injuries, cerebral hemorrhage can result in mental and personality changes as well as in physical changes. What changes stood out to you? Which parts of the book helped convey these changes?
3. All of the main characters in this book have lost something as a consequence of the cerebral hemorrhage, but the losses are different for each family member. Can you explain what the differences are?
4. What effects of the brain injury were hardest for the writer’s mother to recognize at first? What changes in the mother’s perception of herself occurred as the months passed?
5. In the poem “She was happier in rehab,” the mother “quietly seethes.” What happens to her anger as the book progresses/as time passes? Is any of her anger a consequence of her own misunderstanding of her limitations?
6. You first learn about the brother/son having cancer in the poem “Thrown.” How do you think his illness and death played into some of the decisions and actions of other members of the family? Do you think it helped motivate the parents to move back to their home?
7. If the father rather than the mother had suffered the cerebral hemorrhage, how would the course of this story have been different? What coping and/or care-giving skills did the mother have before her stroke that the father might never have had? What knowledge of what it takes to cook, clean, change sheets, etc?
8. Many medical decisions and care-giving tasks fell to the daughter/the author of this memoir. What do you think might have been different if her brother had not had cancer?

Written Approach

1. Many of the vignettes in this collection are written in non-standard form, ie in phrases instead of sentences, or with irregular spacing on the page. On several occasions, a poem even ends on an unfinished sentence. How did these techniques impact you?

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2. Most of these poems are narrative, which is to say they tell a (very short) story. Could this memoir have been written in the form of a series of short prose pieces? Or even one long prose piece? Would it have been easier for you to read? What is gained or lost by how the words appear on the page?
3. Some of the poems in this collection were originally published as stand-alone pieces. Are there any individual poems that could not be published alone – i.e. they only make sense in the context of the whole collection? Do you think anything is gained or lost by collecting these poems in a sequence to form a memoir?
4. Many of the poems are in the voice of healthcare workers, or from the point of view of the mother or the father. Why do you think the writer had relatively few poems written in the first person ?
5. Before reading the above question, did you notice that there were relatively few poems written in the first person? Do you feel you have a sense of how the writer feels? Why or why not?
6. The point of view in this collection switches often. Did you find this disorienting? Interesting? What is gained or lost by this approach to presenting a family crisis?

Specific Poems

1. In the poem called “Week After Week,” the speaker directly states her own response to the family crisis. Can you restate how the speaker feels? What do you think of the end of the poem?
2. The piece called “Rehab Hospital” is written almost entirely in short phrases. Why do you think the writer presented it this way? Who is the speaker in this piece? What does this piece tell you about how the father is reacting? Why do you think this poem ends by repeating “three weeks”?
3. What images or ideas link the first poem of the book, “Leaving,” with the last poem, “Taking This In”? Did you like these as starting/ending places, or would you have wanted to switch things around?
4. The poem “Like Your Grandma” compares the experience of beginning to live with a brain injury with that of being a reluctant immigrant. Did this comparison work for you?
5. The first poem in Part I is called “The Border.” Is this another comparison to entering a new (metaphorical) territory?

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6. Several times in the book, there is a reference to “air,” for example in “Proof,” in “As Though,” and in “Tilt-a-World.” What kinds of meanings does “air” seem to have in each of these poems?
7. How do the poems “Dream” and “My mother’s poem” help you understand the different but simultaneous struggles of each of the writer’s parents? Are there any other poems that helped you understand what the marriage might have been like before the cerebral hemorrhage and how it changed afterwards?
8. How do the titles of the poems “Valiant” and “Her Strength” affect your interpretation of the poems themselves?
9. Are there any other poems you’d like to discuss or that you have questions about?

Please contact Jennifer Freed at jfreed.weebly.com
for book signings, readings, book club presentations, or writing workshops