

A Discussion Guide

Reading Novalis in Montana by Melissa Kwasny

1. The first section of poems in Kwasny's collection begins with the epigraph, "The incomplete still appears the most bearable," a quotation from Novalis, a late 18th-century poet and philosopher of early German Romanticism. Why do you think Kwasny chose this quotation as her epigraph, and how does it relate to some of the themes in her poems?
2. As we read Kwasny, she in turn is reading other authors ("Reading Novalis in Montana," pp. 3-4; "Visiting H.D.'s Grave in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania," p. 23; "Reading a Biography of Ezra Pound in the Garden," p. 24). What kind of relationship exists between the reader and the author? How do Kwasny's relationships with these authors differ from her relationships with the people around her, in particular, the girl from "Pond Ice" and "Brook Trout"?
3. Look closely at poems "The Waterfall: 3" and "The Waterfall: 6". How does Kwasny view humans' relationship with nature? How has this relationship changed from how it was in the past, and how does it continue to change? Does Kwasny feel it should be different?
4. Kwasny quotes Novalis as saying, "All that we experience is a message," ("Reading Novalis in Montana.") Kwasny writes in "Mountains," "I often speak of reading the world," and in her poem "The Waterfall: 3," she says "Guardians of the secret [are] everywhere." How does the natural world communicate with the speaker in these poems? What are some of the things that it tells her? Or how does she attempt to understand it? What does nature offer her?
5. How does Kwasny view ownership and consumerism? How does she view ownership in nature? ("The Waterfall: 10, 11," "The Directions: 5 Animals")

7. Kwasny makes many references, some brief and some extended, to the ancient Greeks and Greek mythology in section IV of her collection, particularly the myth of Persephone, Demeter, and Hades. How does she—and how do we—use history and old tales to make sense of our present condition? What do these comparisons reveal about the human perception of time and history? About human nature and characters over time?

8. Kwasny references not only the ancient religion of the Greeks, but also Native American religion and the tradition of Christianity. Despite statements such as “I am . . . abandoned by a god” (“Reading Novalis in Montana”), “Who believes enough to have a vision now?” (“The Waterfall: 3”), and “The world circles around me with its pack of lies” (“The Under World: 2”), Kwasny writes that, “Even without belief, we must admit to a certain sense of holiness” (“The Directions: 12 Herbs”). Is the possession of belief, or of a vision, a necessary aspect of human experience?

9. The very last line of Kwasny’s book is “Help me to remember who I am.” In the first poem, “Reading Novalis in Montana,” we saw Kwasny questioning whether she should “follow the tundra geese into their storm.” How does Kwasny struggle with her sense of self when she is out in nature? What does she choose to define herself by? (“The Waterfall: 5”; “The Under World: 9”)