

A NOEMI PRESS TEACHING GUIDE

STARLIGHT IN TWO MILLION
A Neo-Scientific Novella

Amy Catanzano

FICTION / POETRY
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OVERVIEW

Starlight in Two Million: A Neo-Scientific Novella (Noemi Press, 2014) by Amy Catanzano can be read as a cross-genre work of speculative fiction and poetry that tells the story of three characters who join forces to stop a war. Written in the narrative mode of what is identified in the Author's Statement as "4th person narration," the text experiments with literary devices such as plot and point of view, and, as a result of the author's interests in science, cosmology, and absurdism, works formally and thematically with principles in quantum mechanics and Alfred Jarry's pataphysics, a "science of imaginary solutions" where "exceptions are the rule."

ANDREW JORON had this to say about the collection: "Amy Catanzano's 'neo-scientific' novella is a metafictional tour de force: a tour of the forces that compose the cosmos, a recomposition of the music of the spheres. Here, narrative flow becomes a kind of quantum fluid, bifurcating into character systems and poetry. Tinctures of the inhuman spread through this writing, causing language to convulse in forms as vivid and varied as the multiverse itself. Alternately explosive and meditative, at once lyrical and conceptual, Catanzano's work renews the pataphysical claim of literature on science. In this work, American literature has found its own Jarry."

BHANU KAPIL wrote, "Amy Catanzano's writing is a vector, releasing sparks. To read her work is to emit / receive—something. From a distant yet intimate point. What will happen next? Where will you go? This novella is a guide-book to a future that has not arrived yet. To 'predicate.' To 'de-olve.' To 'shimmer.' In a book that is a like a nerve."

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AMY CATANZANO is the author of two previous books. *Multiversal* (Fordham University Press), received the PEN USA Literary Award in Poetry and was selected for publication by Michael Palmer as the recipient of Fordham University's POL Prize. *iEpiphany* was published by Anne Waldman's Erudite Fangs Editions. Originally from Boulder, Colorado, Catanzano teaches poetry, fiction, and cross-genre writing as an Assistant Professor of English, the Poet-in-Residence, and the Director of the Creative Writing Program at Wake Forest University in North Carolina.

RELATED READINGS AND LINKS

Catanzano's collections ▶ *Multiversal* (Fordham University Press, 2009) and ▶ *iEpiphany* (Erudite Fangs Editions, 2008)

Catanzano's essay on *Quantum Poetics: Writing the Speed of Light*, in four parts, on Jerome Rothenberg's literary portal *Poems and Poetics*:

- ▶ Quantum Poetics Part 1
- ▶ Quantum Poetics Part 2
- ▶ Quantum Poetics Part 3
- ▶ Quantum Poetics Part 4

SUGGESTED QUESTIONS FOR WRITTEN RESPONSES AND DISCUSSIONS

- ▶ Describe the plot—the sequence of action and events that make up a story—of *Starlight in Two Million: A Neo-Scientific Novella*. If traditional plots have a defined beginning, middle, and end and evoke actions and events that relate to one another in a sequential pattern or through cause and effect, how does *Starlight in Two Million* resist traditional notions of plot? In this resistance, can a plot still be discerned? In what ways is the text structured for a sequential reading?
- ▶ Describe challenges encountered while reading *Starlight in Two Million*. In what ways are you being asked to read differently from other texts that use literary devices such as plot and point of view in a more traditional manner? How did you overcome some of these reading challenges? What challenges, if any, were you unable to overcome, and why?
- ▶ *Starlight in Two Million* can be read as a cross-genre work that combines speculative fiction, poetry, and memoir in a single work. Describe and analyze how the genres of prose fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction collide and/or coexist. How do the genres work with and against each other? Consider the different forms of poetry in the collection such as lyric and lineated poetry and concrete/visual poetry.
- ▶ After reading the Author's Statement at the end of the book on 4th person narration, analyze the way that the text experiments with point of view in relation to concepts such as simultaneity and the 4th dimension of time in physics.
- ▶ If you have read other cross-genre works of literature, how does *Starlight in Two Million* compare in its hybridization of prose fiction with poetry? How does combining distinct forms in a single work contribute to unique possibilities in reading and interpretation?
- ▶ Describe some of the qualities of the characters “Aletheia” and “Epoché” as well as their relationship to one another in the story. In the Author's Statement, the author discusses how the characters' names were inspired by Greek words and concepts. Discuss the symbolism of these names and how they relate to the themes in the book.
- ▶ Who is “the visitor” that appears early on the story, and what function does the visitor play in the plot? What role does the character “the Enduring Karmanaut” play in the story? After a close reading, can you describe the relationship between the visitor and the Enduring Karmanaut?
- ▶ Discuss how the text thematically and/or formally addresses questions and concerns about language, war, and power. How are these concerns treated in relation to other works of contemporary literature? What critical and theoretical frameworks are informing the text?
- ▶ Discuss the cross-genre mode of the text as a form of metafiction, a term given to fictional writing that self-consciously or self-reflexively addresses itself as a work of fiction.
- ▶ Consider the epigraphs. How do they lend critical contexts in which to interpret the text?

➤ Analyze how the text operates at the scale of the line and sentence, discussing literary devices—such as tone, rhythm, syntax, and diction. What aesthetic qualities are distinctive and why?

➤ *Starlight in Two Million: A Neo-Scientific Novella* derives its subtitle from Alfred Jarry's *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel* (1911). Jarry (1873-1907) was a French symbolist known for his literary experiments with form and content as well as for developing “pataphysics,” a “science of imaginary solutions,” among other things. If you are familiar with *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, Pataphysician: A Neo-Scientific Novel*, in what ways does *Starlight in Two Million* invoke Jarry's novel?

➤ After reading Catanzano's essays on Quantum Poetics (see links on Page 1), where she discusses applying principles in theoretical physics and Jarry's pataphysics to the composition and interpretation of literary works, describe and analyze how *Starlight in Two Million* can be interpreted through the framework of Quantum Poetics.

SUGGESTED LINKED CREATIVE WRITING EXERCISES FROM THE AUTHOR

➤ Develop a character from a word used to denote a philosophical concept. Give the character qualities that are shared by the concept.

➤ Write a poem using a principle from theoretical physics such as Werner Heisenberg's uncertainty principle or Albert Einstein's theory of general relativity. Research the principle, and then imaginatively apply some of its properties to the form and/or content of your poem. For example, write a poem that could exist in a rocket traveling at the speed of light where space becomes compressed, mass increases, and time slows. How might space, mass, and time be depicted or enacted?

➤ Write a story using your own version of “4th person narration.” Experiment with how the story can be told using alternate understandings and expressions of time, pacing, and point of view.

➤ Write a literary work of art combining elements of prose fiction, poetry, and/or memoir and an accompanying Artist's Statement about what, if anything, makes these genres distinct.

➤ Develop a poem or story that intentionally resists causality and responds to the following statement: “The alphabet was civilization's first abstract art form. As the actual shape of each letter became divorced from any connection to the image of the thing it might have once represented, the abstract quality of alphabets most likely subliminally reinforced the ability of those who used them to think abstractly. An ideogram or hieroglyph is basically a picture that may contain multiple concepts all superimposed upon one another. The alphabet, on the other hand, strings out these concepts so that they become words in a sentence whose meaning depends on linear sequence. Untangling the multiple ideas coiled within one ideographic image and converting them into linear code reinforces the belief that one thing follows another, and thus ever so surreptitiously, alphabets impose causality upon the thinking process of those who use them.”—Leonard Shlain, *Art & Physics: Parallel Visions in Space, Time, and Light* (William Morrow, 1993)