

Noemi Press Teaching Guide

Uncountry *a mythology*

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Award



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Questions for Discussion #1:

Q: What is a **mythology**? In what ways does *Uncountry* fit that description? Why do myths exist?

Q: “Not as it occurred but as it unraveled. Not as it occurred but as it vanished. Not as it occurred but as it is recollected” (108). How does this series of sentences resonate with the overall project of this book?

Q: Looking at “Exile”: How does the narrator seem to come by the information that is known about Mimmy? What sort of language points to a research process (in this section and others)?

A: “It remains unclear whether she grew up in the village or in Odessa” (25)

A: “Certain documents cannot be found” (57)

A: “His favorite flowers, *one imagines, and then believes*, are fields of marguerites” (60)

Writing Prompt [20-30 mins]

- Imagine that someone alive 200 years from now is writing your biography based on the impressions and artefacts you may have left behind.
 - Write that story.
 - Remember: there are many things they will not be able to know about.
 - Some ways of indicating uncertainty:
 - Use hypothetical or speculative statements. Begin sentences with *If...* and *Perhaps....*
 - Ask questions instead of making declarative statements.

Multi-step Project, Research + Writing

1. Using “History of Ash” as a model, create a **genealogy** for your own family, focusing on one relative in particular.
2. You should use a range of research methods and materials.
 - Can you find family photos? Can you interview that person, or someone who knew them for a long time?
3. What sort of historical research might give you insight into what life was like at a specific location and time?
 - What sort of clothes did people wear?
 - What sort of foods did they eat?
 - What sort of technologies were common?
 - What was the political climate like?
 - What was the weather like?
4. Use the internet to find at least one image which can help give context.
5. Once you’ve outlined some key facts, select a significant moment on the timeline of your subject’s life. Now imagine as many specific, sensory details as you can about that moment. While they don’t need to be provable, they should be plausible.
6. Write a scene that takes place in a specific location and includes some dialogue. Omit the subject’s name (use a pronoun instead), as well as their relationship to you.
7. Try repeating the previous step several times, using a different **point-of-view** each time.
8. Repeat this process 4-5 times, capturing what you think might be some of the most decisive moments of this person’s life story.
9. Now add one final section in which you list everything that you personally remember or know about this person.

Questions for Discussion #2:

Q: Take a look at the Table of Contents. How is *Uncountry* divided? How would you label these divisions—books and chapters? chapters and sections? Do you see a pattern in these divisions, any parallel structure?

Q: “Mimmy reads books backwards. ‘Begin with the end,’ she commanded me” (37). What if we were to follow Mimmy’s advice and read *Uncountry* from end to start? How would that experience be different? To what extent does this book present a **linear narrative**?

Q: Examine the black-and-white images that appear at the start of each chapter. Describe what you see. Are there some elements they all have in common? How do you think these images engage with the book’s themes?

In-class Activity [30 mins]

1. Write an **ekphrastic poem** based on these black-and-white images at the start of each section in *Uncountry*.
2. Share and compare the result with a classmate.
3. How similar or different are your poems?
4. How similar or different are they from *Uncountry*?

Questions for Discussion #3:

Q: What is the purpose of a **prologue**? How do the four prologues in this book (pages 5, 43, 107, 161) perform that function? Do they always seem to connect directly to the sections that follow? How does it affect your reading experience that the prologues primarily introduce characters using only pronouns?

Q: How do you read the sections that occur at the start of each numerated section (Lilith, Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, Esther)?

- How do these relate to the sections that follow? Are they summaries?
- How would the book be different if these sections were removed?
- Why do you think the author has used forward slashes instead of periods here? For instance: Do you read this as indicating multiple options or rather a list?
- Note the sort of actions or states that are listed here. What do you notice?
 - Are they specific events? Are they **literal or figurative**? Are they actions, states of mind, or states of being? Are the sentences **passive or active** (i.e. “A woman is erased from the Book” versus “A woman cannot find a place to rest”)?

Homework Activity

1. Adapt the model of the sub-sections “Lilith,” “Abraham,” etc. to create your own social commentary.
2. Use this method to summarize the plot of a movie or television show you’ve watched recently, beginning each sentence with “A woman is…” or “A man is…”.
3. Instead of telling everything that happens to one specific character, tell everything that happens to characters of a particular gender.
4. You should mention both literal and figurative actions and states—i.e. “A man wanders” versus “A man is absurd.”
5. Think through the punctuation you use to separate the list items. Is the forward slash most suitable? How would it be different if you used commas, periods, semi-colons, colons, dashes, ampersands, or some other symbol?
6. *Repeat activity, using a classic work of literature as the source.*
7. *Repeat activity, using one issue of a periodical, such as a magazine, newspaper, or a radio show/podcast, such as NPR’s “Morning Edition.”*
8. *Repeat activity, using whatever has appeared on your social media feed in the past 24 hours.*

Questions for Discussion #4

Q: *Uncountry* is a **hybrid-genre work**, containing elements of fiction, nonfiction and poetry. Can you find examples? Where does the text feel more like prose, and where does it feel more like poetry? (A: 97, 174)

- Note use of punctuation, white space, line breaks, standard dialogue format.
- Some terms which might be useful in analyzing this book as a work of poetry: **metaphor, allusion, personification, rhythm, assonance, anaphora.**
- On pages 18-19, large amounts of white space are preserved between the text. Why do you think this is?
- Consider “Barren.” In this section, the form changes from the beginning to the end. How would you describe this transformation?

Q: In certain sections, characters are referred to with pronouns alone, or with general terms like “the daughter,” or “the girl.” In “Wandering,” for instance, the man is never named, but his companion *is*. Why do you think the author makes this choice?

Q: Characters are also sometimes introduced as collective entities. “From” begins by referring to “mothers” and “some daughters.” How do we come to land on specific individuals by the end of this section? Point to the spot in the text where this shift occurs.

Questions for Discussion #5

Q: How would you describe the **setting** of this book? Does everything occur in a single place, or a single time? Give some evidence to support your claim.

- Find some examples of realistic, real-world settings (A: List of monuments on page 12, Farwell Ave, Milwaukee on page 18).
- Find some examples of fantastical or imaginative settings (A: “The city of clay...east of the clay mountain” on page 43, the unnamed island in “Tribe”).
- Find examples of present-day settings.
- Find examples of historical settings.
- Find examples of rural vs. urban settings (A: Compare 175 and 185, for ex).
- Are there any places where these different worlds seem to merge — past into present, magical into real, nature into the city?

Questions for Discussion #6

Q: What sorts of **point-of-view** are used in this book? (A: **Omniscient third, limited-third, second-person singular, second-person plural, first-person**).

- Contrast the way in which point-of-view functions in “From” and “Faith.”
- Track point-of-view in History of Hunger, Part II: (“Mistress,” “Leaving,” and “Falling”). How is the “she” in “Mistress” related to the speaker in “Falling”?
- What effect does it have when the “I” appears? For example: on pages 31, 66, 93 and 196. Who is this speaker? Is it the same one each time? Is this the **implied author**? What makes you say this?
- What effect does it have on your reading experience when the text evokes an **implied reader**, such as the “you” in the fourth prologue (161) and in “Flag” (202).
 - Take note of the specific language that has the effect of positing a **rhetorical situation** here. (“But you might ask” and “You might add...” (207))

Q: “We are never ourselves except when we sleep.” (163) Why do you think dreams are evoked so frequently in this book? (55, 75, 78, 99, 117, 189 & 195).

Q: Choose one dream that you particularly enjoyed. What makes this so fun to read?

Writing Prompts [15-20 mins]

1. Recall a dream that was particularly hard for you to shake.
2. Re-read the passage on page 197 that begins “I fall asleep in the garden, in a spot of sunlight.” Write about a time that your own senses were fooled. How did you come to realize that what you thought you saw/heard/felt was really something else?

Questions for Discussion #7

Q: One theme of this book is how language operates: “The story came to me in images, not words. So this is a translation” (161). Find passages that talk about translation between the language of thought and spoken/written language, translation between different languages, or the evolution of language over time (i.e. **etymologies**).

Q: What sort of commentary is the author making about the particularities and difficulties of human communication here?

- “There is a German expression that could be translated into spring fatigue.” (64)
- “The German word for wound is spelled similarly to the German word for miracle.” (93)
- “The word ‘moth’ is related to the Old English word for ‘maggot.’ (119)