



## **Innovative Flash Fiction by Women A Reader's Guide to Three Recent Collections by Fiction Collective 2 Authors**

In 2019, Fiction Collective 2/University of Alabama Press published three collections of short fiction, all by women, and all approaching the genre of “flash fiction” in powerful and innovative ways. Taken together, the three collections provide evidence of the range of this form, inviting provocative topics for discussion related to contemporary fiction, publishing, women’s writing, and the parameters of flash fiction. The following questions/topics invite inquiry and discussion and are appropriate for reading groups, creative writing workshops, or seminars in contemporary, innovative, and/or women’s literature.

### **Questions and Topics for Discussion**

1. We first read volumes of fiction as singularities, but no one truly writes alone, without influence. What cultural, political, or literary context do you see for these three collections? If fiction can provide a measure of contemporary times, do these collections ask you to consider particular strands of urgency?
2. These three collections are archives of a new feminism. Do you agree with this claim? If so, how would you define “a new feminism,” and what commonalities do you see in these independent and disparate witnessings that illuminate or underscore such a reality?
3. Violence and its counterparts, accountability and consequence, are subjects of some of these stories. What narrative techniques do the authors use to reveal (make real) violence? What choices must a writer make when presenting violence? How do we avoid gratuitous or exploitative representations, and what value systems come into play in suggesting that we must?
4. In *New Flash Fiction Review*, Aimee Parkison, coauthor of *Girl Zoo*, lays a foundation for what flash fiction is or can be:

...flash fiction redefines fiction-writing basics through the innovation of compression by using a sort of implied narrative for world building. In this unconventional, compressed world building, the understory of innuendo, cultural context, artful subtext, and understated clues lure the reader into unspoken concerns at the heart of the story. What is unspoken drives the narrative, or rather the anti-narrative, of the short-short story.

5. If worldbuilding is absent or differently construed in these short works, where do you as a reader find a hook, or locate your interest in the story? How are the elements of fiction telescoped or redefined in unconventionally constructed narratives?

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6. In her foreword to Carolyn Heilbrun's *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), Katha Pollitt writes "Storylessness, after all, has been women's biggest problem." Is this still true today, and if so, how do these narratives posit "story"? Do they address a lack for women in this cultural landscape, in this reality?
7. *Famous Children and Famished Adults* is a collection of short fiction; *Girl Zoo* is a collection of thematically linked fictions; *Once into the Night* is a faux life story. Considering these varieties on creating a whole, can you identify authorial intent in the placement of specific pieces? Based on placement, can you identify narratives that offer distinct keys to reading the collection as a whole?
8. The body, the female body in particular, is built and broken down in many of these stories. Teasing out the idea of narrative and its origins, do you see a natural or likely relationship between the body itself and The Heroic Journey? How can carnality be used to reinvent this trope in literature?
9. What makes a story funny? What is "funny"? Consider moments in these narratives that, through discomfort, absurdity, or slapstick, use humor to highlight meaning.
10. A writer is like a magician, hiding at least half the story. When is a piece of the story obscured, and what is the effect on you as a reader? Can a writer go too far in not offering enough? In short narratives that rely on gesture, metaphor, and tone, when or how do you know "what the story is about"?
11. Heterosexuality is a key component of many fictional narratives. How do queer characters challenge heterosexual romance narratives? Can queerness co-exist with romantic conventions or does it necessarily demand its own formal structures, even its own genres?
12. All three of these texts deviate from conventional plot devices by using challenging lyrical or jagged syntax and sound. If these books were set to music, what would that music be like? Isolate a particular passage in each book that strikes you as emblematic of the author's literary style. How does sound work to convey meaning?
13. Which characters felt most emotionally believable? Which characters felt like deliberate fictions or metaphors for something other than realistic human behavior? What are the pros and cons, for writer and reader, of breaking with emotional believability?
14. Here and elsewhere, women's pleasure is frequently interwoven with consumption -- consuming food, sex, material goods. Yet women are also consumed, with and without consent, sexually, emotionally, physically. How do you see the urge to consume connected to gender and sexuality in these books?



15. *Girl Zoo* was written as a collaboration between two authors, both female-identified-at-birth, both white, one heterosexual, one queer. How does knowing *Girl Zoo* is a collaboration shape your reading of this book?

16. Many women grow up learning cautionary tales about the terrible things that happen to girls and women who cross boundaries, who overstep, who walk the streets at night. Where do these writers riff off cautionary tales and how do they rewrite them?

17. How do these collections represent artistically adventurous and nontraditional fiction? What risks are these authors taking, and how does their work represent fiction that breaks away from the confines of conventional fiction? How do these books fit with the mission statement of FC2, which seeks to publish innovative fiction?

18. Experimental fiction is often believed to be more challenging for the reader because its goal is not accessibility but artistic innovation. In what ways was reading these books more challenging than reading more traditional fiction? How did these books challenge and surprise you as a reader?

19. Why do you think writers write experimental work? What is to be gained by artistic innovation? Why do fewer readers read experimental work? Why do certain nonprofit and university presses publish experimental work?

### **About the Authors:**

[Carol Guess](#) is the coauthor of *Girl Zoo* (FC2 2019), as well as nineteen other books of poetry and prose, including *Darling Endangered*, *Doll Studies: Forensics*, *Tinderbox Lawn*, and *With Animal* (cowritten with Kelly Magee). In 2014 she was awarded the Philolexian Award for Distinguished Literary Achievement by Columbia University. She teaches in the MFA program at Western Washington University and lives in Seattle.

[Evelyn Hampton](#) is the author of *Famous Children and Famished Adults*, which won the Ronald Sukenick Innovative Fiction contest and was published by FC2 in 2019; *The Aleatory Abyss* (Publishing Genius 2017); *Discomfort* (Ellipsis Press 2015); and the chapbooks *We Were Eternal and Gigantic* (Magic Helicopter Press), *MADAM* (Meekling Press), and *Seven Touches of Music* (alice blue books). She lives in Denver.

[Aimee Parkison](#) is the coauthor of *Girl Zoo* (FC2 2019) as well as s well as the novels *Refrigerated Music for a Gleaming Woman* (winner of the 2017 Catherine Doctorow Innovative Fiction Prize, FC2), *The Petals of Your Eyes* (Starcherone/Dzanc 2014) and two story collections, *Woman with Dark Horses* (Starcherone 2004) and *The Innocent Party*, (BOA Editions, Ltd., American Reader Series 2012). Parkison's fiction has won numerous awards and

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fellowships, including the Catherine Doctorow Innovative Fiction Award, a Christopher Isherwood Fellowship, the Kurt Vonnegut Prize from *North American Review*, the Starcherone Prize for Innovative Fiction, the Jack Dyer Prize from *Crab Orchard Review*, a North Carolina Arts Council Fellowship, a Writers at Work Fellowship, a Puffin Foundation Fellowship, and an American Antiquarian Society William Randolph Hearst Creative Artists Fellowship. Parkison has served as the director of the Creative Writing Program at Oklahoma State University, where she teaches fiction writing. Since the summer of 2019, she has served on the FC2 Board of Directors.

[Aurelie Sheehan](#) is the author of *Once into the Night*, winner of FC2's 2018 Catherine Doctorow Innovative Fiction Prize, as well as *Jewelry Box: A Collection of Histories* (BOA Editions), *Demigods on Speedway* (University of Arizona Press), *Jack Kerouac Is Pregnant* (Dalkey Archive Press) and two novels, *The Anxiety of Everyday Objects* and *History Lesson for Girls* (both Viking Penguin). *This Blue*, a novella, was published as a *Ploughshares* Solo in 2014. Individual stories and essays have appeared in *Alaska Quarterly*, *Conjunctions*, *Epoch*, *Fence*, *Mississippi Review*, *Nimrod International Journal*, *New England Review*, *The New York Times*, *Ploughshares*, and *The Southern Review*. Sheehan has received a Pushcart Prize, a Jack Kerouac Literary Award, a Camargo Fellowship, and an Artists Projects Award from the Arizona Commission on the Arts. She is a professor of fiction and the head of the English Department at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

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