



Readers' Discussion Guide

An Introduction to *The Healing Muse* Volume 14

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The Healing Muse is a journal unique in its approach to illness, medicine, and the body. Composed of narratives of prose, short stories, and poetry, it can help those experiencing illness in any context as well as those interested in studying literature and medicine. To guide both readers and educators, we've provided a starting point for discussion for use in classrooms, book groups, or one's own exploration.

Grief

How to Endure the Beast Called Grief by Donna K. Pflueger

In this poem Pflueger takes an active stance against grief. She demands we stare it down, "raise hell... and win." How does this perspective differ from the traditional? What does the poem reveal about the narrator?

Crazy Chick Waiting For a Collect Call From the Sundance Kid by Jill Swenson

Swenson's essay describes how grief makes her feel. "Grief makes me regress. Irritable and fussy like a teething baby." She uses denial and dissociation as "weapons" of self-defense against grief. Compare and contrast her reactions to grief to Pflueger's. Does one seem better? Healthier? Easier?

Inheritance/Family Traits

Roman Bridges by Kaitlin Kyi and *Why I Realized* by Carson Jordan

In *Roman Bridges* Kyi wonders if being a medical student means she knows too much about the science of heredity. She wonders if she is predisposed to having terminal cancer like her mother. She wonders if she should live her life differently. She describes the other traits she inherited from her mother as well as what she has learned about empathy and grieving from her mother's illness.

In *Why I Realized* Jordan's speaker catalogs the family "traits" that have been passed to her. What is her inheritance? How does Carson view the "traits"? Does the poem seem to push her beyond those traits?

Compare and contrast the family characteristics in *Roman Bridges* and *Why I Realized*. What impact does the family have on each speaker? Does the knowledge each has gained from reflecting about family empower? How so?

Family Perspective and Medical Care

The Nurse We Needed by Lisa Romeo

In this essay the daughter feels cheated because of her father's sudden death after entering hospice. Why? What did each family member need from the father? Why does the nurse in hospice describe a very different patient? Can both portraits of the father be true?

The Only Thing We've Got by Lili Flanders

In this essay, the mother is upset with the doctor who is treating her 18-year-old son for a brain tumor. Discuss the doctor's lack of professionalism when he communicates to the parents via hand signals that the tumor is getting bigger. The mother is upset with his arrogance and his lack of empathy. What is "the only thing" the mother and father have? What is the irony of the doctor's confidence in his own good health?

Only Kindness Makes Sense by Elaine Mansfield

The physician is given an opportunity by his patient to modify his "bedside manner." Why did he need this chance? How did the patient make it happen? The wife has empathy for the physician and his residents. What does the essay imply about our ability to show empathy?