

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE -- SUMMER COMMON READING 2021

Marianne Chan, *All Heathens*

THREE WAYS (AND A BONUS ROUND) OF READING A POEM

Oliver Baez Bendorf, Assistant Professor of English

Anyone can read and talk about a poem—yes, including you. Here are some simple steps you can take, and questions to ponder, as you read the poems in *All Heathens*. Aim to complete Step 1 for the entire book, then choose certain poems to go deeper with Steps 2, 3, and bonus round.

1. First impressions, gut reactions: Look at the poem on the page, then read it silently.
 - Do you notice anything interesting about the structure or form—the way the poem looks on the page?
 - What does the title seem to promise or suggest? Did the poem match your expectations?
 - What stood out to you, struck you, or compelled you right away?
 - How did the poem make you feel? Were you surprised by anything?
 - Did the piece remind you of any other pieces of literature, or other popular culture like music, movies, or TV shows?
2. Then, read for language, pattern, and rhythm: Read the poem out loud—to yourself, or a sibling, friend, pet or even a houseplant. Doing this once is awesome, twice is better!
 - Do its rhythms remind you of anything? A type of music, some physical activity, a certain landscape or a mood?
 - What words in the poem especially move you?
 - What effect do the line breaks or line lengths have on your experience of the poem?
 - What elements repeat, if any? Does the pattern surprise you anywhere?
 - How would you describe the imagery?
3. Finally, read for story, speaker, and insight: If possible, find someone *else* to read the poem out loud to you while you listen. If not possible, just read it out loud again.
 - What happens in the poem? Who's speaking? To whom? What's the occasion?
 - What individual words, phrases, or lines burst with meaning for you? Can you pinpoint why?
 - Do you feel this poem in your body anywhere? If so, where?
 - Were you reminded of any of your own life experiences?
 - What does this poem prompt you to think about or wonder?

BONUS ROUND: Are there any words or references in the poem that are new to you, or used in unfamiliar ways? Use context clues (the rest of the poem) or reference resources (dictionary, web search) to help your understanding. How do your findings change your experience of the poem?