

ABOUT THE TEXT

***Bluets* by Maggie Nelson**

Wave Books, 2009

10th Anniversary Hardcover: September 3, 2019

Genre(s): Lyric essay, experimental memoir, prose poetry.

Classes and levels: Upper-level high school English and creative writing; undergraduate English and creative writing; MFA craft courses and workshops in poetry, prose, and experimental forms.

Content warning: Explicit language; brief but graphic descriptions of sex.

About *Bluets* (c/o Wave):

"Since 2009, when it first published, to today, *Bluets* has drawn scores of readers with its surprising insights into the emotional depths that make us most human—via 240 short pieces, at once lyrical and philosophical, on the color blue. This beautiful hardcover edition celebrates Maggie Nelson's uncompromising vision, inviting longtime fans and newcomers alike to experience and share in an indispensable work that continues to disrupt the literary landscape.

A lyrical, philosophical, and often explicit exploration of personal suffering and the limitations of vision and love, as refracted through the color blue, while folding in, and responding to, the divergent voices and preoccupations of such generative figures as Wittgenstein, Sei Shonagon, William Gass and Joan Mitchell. *Bluets* further confirms Maggie Nelson's place within the pantheon of brilliant lyric essayists."

Author's bio (c/o Wave):

"Maggie Nelson is the author of nine books of poetry and prose, many of which have become cult classics defying categorization. She first published *Bluets* with Wave Books in 2009; in 2015, *Bookforum* named *Bluets* one of the top 10 best books of the past 20 years. Her other nonfiction titles include the National Book Critics Circle Award winner *The Argonauts* (2015), *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (2011; a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year), *The Red Parts: Autobiography of a Trial* (2007), and *Women, the New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (2007). Her poetry titles include *Something Bright, Then Holes* (2007), and *Jane: A Murder* (2005). She writes frequently on art, and in 2016 was awarded a MacArthur "genius" Fellowship. She currently lives in Los Angeles."

LESSON PLANS

Introductory Lecture:

- Position *Bluets* as a kind of memoir by first defining memoir, autobiography, biography, and other forms of life writing. For undergraduates, use supplemental essays to do this, such as chapters from *Memoir: An Introduction* by G. Thomas Couser (Oxford University Press, 2012).
- Consider the many types of memoir: topical, relational, confessional, philosophical...
- Discuss *Bluets* in terms of where it falls between poetry and prose, fiction and non-fiction, criticism and literature. Are these distinctions important? Compare *Bluets* to other works that the class has read, or for more advanced students, use theoretical texts to consider genre boundaries.

In-Class Discussions:

- How does the topic of "blue" allow Nelson to discuss a wide array of things? Why does she choose blue in particular?
- Writerly Voice. Compare the speaker's voice to other writers we've discussed. Is it distanced? Emotional? What does she confess to us and what does she leave out? What kind of language does she use to describe her life, her philosophical musings, and her investigation of blue?
- Tone and Mood. Tone is the author or speaker's attitude towards what she is talking about. Mood is the feeling we get as readers. Sometimes these are the same and sometimes they are very different. Consider tone and mood in relation to *Bluets* and track where these shift for you in different sections.
- Diction. Why does the speaker talk about sex with her former partner in blunt, graphic language but use more elevated language for other subjects? What effect does this have on you?
- Allusions, Quotations, Sources. Consider Nelson's many references and quotes from philosophy, art, literature, the sciences, and pop culture. Why does she bring other authorities into her memoir? How does she incorporate these quotes in different ways? Why are some people left anonymous ("a young doctor," her injured friend) while others are given full names? There is no formal Works Cited or endnotes section—what does this tell us about the book's ethos and genre?
- Point of View. Nelson goes between a first and second person address. Who is the "you" she is writing to? What does the intimacy of this address do to readers?
- Tense and Temporality. Clearly, all memoirs are written about events in the past, but Nelson goes between past and present tense when relaying her experiences. This is a specific technique. How do you experience time in the book? When does it feel more urgent or more slowed-down? Look at particular sections.

In-Class Exercises and Homework:

- Research. For homework, briefly research one of the authors, artists, books, or facts Nelson alludes to, quotes, or references. Choose something or someone you're unfamiliar with! Present your findings to the class, using images or videos if relevant. How does your understanding of *Bluets* change when you know what the author is referencing?
- Recurring Threads. As an experimental memoir, *Bluets* braids together several threads of argument and narrative. Identify these as you read. Some include: physical vs. emotional suffering, love, spirituality, and perception.
- In one class meeting, students can be divided into small groups, each focusing on a different subject thread. Then as a class, consider how these threads add up to an overall argument, story, or "point" (or if they do not).
- Formal Strategies. Assign this interview between Nelson and Evan Lavender-Smith, "The Fragment as a Unit of Prose Composition," *continent*, Issue 3.1 (2011) pp. 158-170: <http://www.continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/47>
- Then in class, talk about form. The book is made of a series of short paragraphs of prose which are sequentially numbered. What do the numbers mean in terms of adding up to something, signaling the passage of time, or standing in for a story's beginning, middle, and end? What are other ways to read these sections? Consider how they might be poems, propositions, fragments, or proofs.
- A Writer Writing. There are moments in *Bluets* where Nelson talks about the process of researching and writing the book that becomes *Bluets*. What do these meta moments do to our understanding of the author as both an invented literary speaker and a real person?
- Affiliated Texts. For extra reading and literary analysis work, assign an excerpt from a text that Nelson references (Goethe, Wittgenstein, Sei Shonagon, etc) or a lyric essay by another contemporary writer. One suggestion for a formally experimental essay on a similar topic is Eula Biss's "The Pain Scale."

Creative Writing Prompts:

- Find a blue thing that Nelson *doesn't* mention. It can be something blue you see or hear in your daily environment or something you've discovered on the Internet or in a book. Share the object with the class and then write about it for 5-10 minutes, letting your mind wander into other associations.
- In a stream-of-consciousness way, write about an obsession you have (or used to have) and how it connects to aspects of your life.
- Describe your childhood bedroom in as much detail as possible, allowing your memories to surface.

- What media worlds have you lived in? Think about your favorite movies, TV shows, music, video games, and books. What characters and settings did you spend a lot of time with and in?
- Are you a minor expert in anything? Write about a hobby, sport, family business, or passion.
- Consider the very big topic of "suffering," which Nelson explores in depth. How do you think suffering relates to spirituality, love, or beauty? What is the worst kind of suffering you've experienced or can imagine experiencing? Why would a person want to write about pain?
- Make lists for each of the following topics and then choose one to explore in a longer, more polished piece: important places in your life, favorite and least favorite activities, important relationships, animals you've known, stories about your body, times of adversity, turning points, regrets, unsolved mysteries.

Longer Essay Prompt:

- Drawing from ideas that you've generated in our many in-class writing prompts, choose one personal obsession, passion, or interest to explore in greater depth. Like Nelson, you should write about your own experience and/or philosophical perspective and draw on the thoughts and experiences of others. This essay therefore requires that you use at least three outside sources, which can be woven into your essay as quoted or paraphrased material.
- You don't need to approach this like a traditional paper for an English class. You don't need to craft a thesis-driven argument (though you may choose to argue!). You don't need to use only academic sources.
- At least one source should be scholarly. The others can be from almost anywhere: movies, song lyrics, quotes from novels, etc.
- Consider how to blend research and memoir together in an artful way. I suggest writing a lot first and seeing what connections emerge naturally, but you can start with an outline if that makes more sense to you.
- After you've finished writing your essay, compose a one paragraph reflection about your process, formal decisions, sources, and inspirations from class discussions. Put this at the end of the paper, before the Works Cited.
- Note: There are length and outside source requirements for this essay, but outside of that, you may choose to be more formally experimental. If you choose a very unconventional structure, be sure you can defend that choice in your reflection paragraph.

Credit:

These prompts and lecture notes derive from Claire Cronin's English 1102 course at University of Georgia, 2018-2019.