

ABOUT THE TEXT

***The Word Pretty* by Elisa Gabbert
Black Ocean, 2018**

Genre(s): Essays, lyric essays, criticism

Classes and levels: MFA craft courses and workshops in nonfiction; adult writing groups and book clubs. Stand-alone essays could be taught in undergraduate creative writing or literature courses.

About *The Word Pretty* (c/o Black Ocean):

"In *The Word Pretty* Elisa Gabbert brings together her unique humor and observational intelligence to create a roving and curious series of lyrical essays, which combine elements of criticism, meditation, and personal essay reminiscent of the work of Wayne Koestenbaum, Sven Birkerts, and Maggie Nelson. Here you will find works on crying, dreams, and notebooking alongside critical engagements with aphorism, the art of the paragraph, the difference between poetry and prose, and the appeal of translator's notes, as well as a discussion of John Berger, reflecting on beauty and the male gaze."

Author's bio (c/o Gabbert's website):

"Elisa Gabbert is a poet and essayist and the author of four collections: *The Word Pretty* (Black Ocean, 2018), *L'Heure Bleue, or the Judy Poems* (Black Ocean, 2016), *The Self Unstable* (Black Ocean, 2013), and *The French Exit* (Birds LLC, 2010). *The Word Pretty* was a *New York Times* Editors' Pick, and *The Self Unstable* was chosen by *The New Yorker* as one of the best books of 2013. Elisa's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Guardian Long Read*, *The London Review of Books*, *Boston Review*, *The Paris Review Daily*, *Pacific Standard*, *Guernica*, and many other venues. *The Unreality of Memory & Other Essays* is forthcoming in August 2020 from FSG Originals and in Autumn 2020 from Atlantic UK."

TEACHING OR READING GROUP GUIDE

Discussion Topics and Questions:

- These essays are about very contemporary things. Gabbert mentions YouTube, emoji, popular TV shows, and other aspects of life in the twenty-first century. In her essay "The Inelegent Translation," she raises a familiar question about art and timelessness: "if we

want to be read five or twenty or two hundred years in the future, how are we to handle pop culture (or culture at all)?" (p. 36).

- What do you think makes a work of art relevant for decades or centuries? How should a writer deal with specific, timely cultural references? What do we want art to do or be when we say we want art to be "timeless"? Is timelessness even possible? Do you worry about this issue in your own writing? Do you think Gabbert's book will "stand the test of time," as they say?
- Consider the structure of the book as a whole: the order of essays, the three divided sections, the title, and the choice to have "Personal Data" as the opening piece. How does this essay, which is about writing and keeping a notebook, serve as an entry into Gabbert's book and teach us how to read what follows?
- Discuss tone, style, and voice. How would you describe Gabbert's emotional tone when she writes about her personal life and her thoughts about art and culture? Compare her voice to other essayists you've read.
- How can a person write about their own thoughts without becoming too self-indulgent? Or is self-indulgence not a problem in the genre of the personal essay? Why do writers so often want to write about writing, and how can this be done in a way that is interesting for non-writers to read?
- Should all essays, by definition, be topical? How much discursiveness is permitted before the essay loses its center? Do all essays need to make arguments? Are these requirements looser for so-called "lyric essays"? How does Gabbert, in particular, weave together criticism, argument, narrative, and a variety of topics?
- Discuss the aesthetic preferences Gabbert confesses to holding throughout the book, such as her need for paragraph breaks in long works of prose and her love of front matter. Do you hold the same opinions? What are your preferences and pet peeves about grammar, genre, titles, and literary style?

Writing Prompts:

- Keep your own "lyric notebook" for a week, month, or semester. This should not be a diary but a place to write down scraps of thought which may become poetry or prose later.
- Write an essay about a phenomenon on the Internet and, if you like, use it as a way to talk about something more personal, the way that Gabbert does with YouTube in "Variations on Crying."
- Write about yourself as compared to a fictional character you know well, as Gabbert does with Anne of Green Gables.
- Following "Meditation on the Word Pretty," write your own meditation about a word that you feel is overused, underused, or misused in contemporary culture.