

ABOUT THE TEXT

***Wild Milk* by Sabrina Orah Mark Dorothy, a publishing project, 2018**

Genre(s): Fiction, short stories, prose poetry.

Classes and levels: Undergraduate and graduate-level literature and creative writing courses; adult writing groups.

About *Wild Milk* (c/o Dorothy):

"*Wild Milk* is like Borscht Belt meets Leonora Carrington; it's like Donald Barthelme meets Pony Head; it's like the Brothers Grimm meet Beckett in his swim trunks at the beach. In other words, this remarkable collection of stories is unlike anything else you've read."

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

"Sabrina Orah Mark grew up in Brooklyn, New York. She earned a BA from Barnard College, Columbia University, an MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a PhD in English from the University of Georgia. She is the author of the book-length poetry collections *The Babies* (2004), winner of the Saturnalia Book Prize chosen by Jane Miller, and *Tsim Tsum* (2009), as well as the chapbook *Walter B.'s Extraordinary Cousin Arrives for a Visit & Other Tales* from Woodland Editions. Her collection of stories, *Wild Milk*, was published by Dorothy in 2018. Mark's awards include a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a Sustainable Arts Foundation Award, and a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Her poetry and stories most recently appear in *American Short Fiction*, *The Bennington Review*, *Tin House* (Open Bar), *The Collagist*, *jubilat*, *The Believer*, and have been anthologized in *Best American Poetry 2007*, *Legitimate Dangers: American Poets of the New Century* (2006), and *My Mother She Killed Me, My Father He Ate Me: Forty New Fairy Tales* (2010). She has taught at Agnes Scott College, University of Georgia, Rutgers University, University of Iowa, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, Goldwater Hospital, and throughout the New York City and Iowa Public School System. She lives in Athens, Georgia with her husband, Reginald McKnight, and their two sons."

TEACHING GUIDE

Discussion Topics and Questions:

- Genre and form. How does the brevity of these stories allow Mark to create certain effects? Do you read them as short stories, prose poems, or something else? Consider Mark's diction, syntax, rhythm or music, lineation, and use of lists.
- These are surreal, absurd stories that follow a kind of dream logic. Yet they also feature recognizable characters, settings, and events which feel emotionally real. Identify moments where Mark makes an irrational or strange substitution within a mundane situation. What does this do to your interpretation of the story's meaning? How does this change your emotional investment in the narrative?
- This is a book about family life, with recurring familial archetypes and a special focus on mothers, motherhood, and children. How does the idea of who or what a mother is deepen and shift across stories? You can also discuss other figures: fathers, stepmothers, sisters, brothers, daughters, sons, and husbands.
- Are these stories political? If so, what is their mode of political critique or commentary? Discuss the story "For the Safety of Our Country."
- What is the effect of including the names of public figures in different stories? This happens across *Wild Milk*, but is especially noticeable in "Are You My Mother?" and "Let's Do This Once More, but This Time with Feeling."
- Discuss some of the recurring symbols in the book, such as the mouse. At certain points in *Wild Milk*, a mouse is something to fear, while at other times it is a small, vulnerable prey animal. Track how the symbol of the mouse transforms in different stories.
- Consider the story "Tweet." How and why does Mark deploy terms from Twitter and social media (such as "following" and "tagged") to create a surrealist narrative about community roles, longing, and female experience?

Exercises, Assignments, Writing Prompts:

- Consider *Wild Milk* in the context of Surrealism. Read Andre Breton's much-quoted *Manifesto of Surrealism* or any introductory text about the movement and look at examples of Surrealist art and literature from this period. How does Mark's work extend this tradition?
- Read *Wild Milk* alongside prose poems by other masters of the tragicomic, surreal micro-narrative, such as James Tate and Russell Edson.
- Read *Wild Milk* alongside another Surrealist book from Dorothy, *The Complete Stories of Leonora Carrington*.
- Use a Surrealism-inspired method of composition to begin writing a short story or poem. You can try automatic writing, dream journaling, the exquisite corpse game, or using found language from various sources.

- The Surreal Object. Choose an object with possible symbolic qualities, like Mark's "mouse" or "milk." Then, answer a series of questions about the object. After you've finished, use the writing generated by this Q&A in a piece of creative writing.
 - o Questions: Is this object diurnal or nocturnal? Is it capable of mutation? What era is it from? What element is it (earth, air, wind, fire)? With what historical figure can it be associated? How does it die? What illness does it call to mind? What might its profession be? Is it happy or unhappy? What language does it speak? Who is its favorite writer? What is its favorite movie? What place does it occupy within a family? How would you kill it? How does it get around? What city was it born in? What scent does it give off? (*Questions are partly taken from "To Determine the Irrational Characteristics of Objects" from *A Book of Surrealist Games*, ed. Mel Gooding.)
- Consider *Wild Milk* in terms of Jewish history and culture, pointing to occasions in the book with specifically Jewish characters. To inform this discussion, read Mark's essay "Cracked Fairy Tales and the Holocaust" in *The Paris Review*:
<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/08/cracked-fairytales-and-the-holocaust/>