

***Areas of Fog* by Will Dowd**
Study Guide
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Synopsis

Areas of Fog is a collection of lyric essays in the form of a weather journal. The book was written over the course of one year in the tradition of Thoreau's *Walden*. Each essay opens with a weather report, then promptly digresses. Fusing the personal and the historical, the natural and the cultural, this eclectic collection touches on themes of solitude, madness, and the nature of happiness. Ultimately the book's true subject is not outer but inner weather.

Author Bio

Will Dowd was born in Braintree, Massachusetts. He earned a B.A. from Boston College, as a Presidential Scholar; an M.S. from MIT, as a John Lyons Fellow; and an M.F.A. in Creative Writing from New York University, as a Jacob K. Javits Fellow. His writing and art have appeared in numerous magazines. He lives in the Boston area.

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Study Guide Questions

Knowledge

1. Other than precipitation and temperature, list other weather phenomena that were mentioned in the essays.
2. Identify the way(s) in which weather is a unifier for people.
3. Name two examples of how Dowd uses personification when describing the weather.
4. Will Dowd cleverly imbeds historical knowledge into his musings about weather. Identify three things you learned from reading these essays.
5. "London Town" is the opening essay. In this piece, Will Dowd discusses the literary merits of fog. What other stories can you think of which prominently feature fog?

Comprehension

1. Choose one essay that resonated with you. Why does this essay stick with you? Describe which images or themes were most appealing.
2. In "Latitudes," Dowd asks "Why do I live here?" Can you relate? Have you ever felt the same way about where you live?
3. Describe a time when the weather has ruined an event for you, or at least put a damper on things.

4. Will Dowd doesn't just write about the weather. Discuss what you view as other themes in the book.
5. Consider the phrase, "Carpe Diem." Dowd claims we don't seize the day, the day seizes us. Explain why you agree or disagree.

Application

1. In "Rara Avis," Dowd recounts a late-night encounter with a black kitten and jokes that he sometimes suspects sparrows are talking about him. When was your last encounter with an animal in nature? Construct a scene from the animal's point of view. What would it have to say to you?
2. Dowd uses comedy to balance the sometimes serious nature of weather. Choose an essay that combines seriousness with humor. Report on what makes the opposing elements work.
3. Several essays touch upon human frailty. Report on the ways the author conveys this message.

Analysis

1. Choose two selections that resonated with you. Compare and contrast the two essays.
2. In "The Painter of Sunflowers" and "High and Dry" the sun is a significant part of the essay. Compare and contrast the way the sun is depicted in these two essays.
3. Differentiate how "Orange Peels," "Narcissus" and "Ocean Sounds" are unlike other essays in this book.
4. In "The Silent W," Dowd discusses nomen est omen, the concept that our name is our destiny. Debate the idea that our name is our destiny.

Synthesis

1. In "Outro," Dowd mentions how Herman Melville used to daydream that one day he and Shakespeare would run into each other and get drunk on rum punch. Imagine a conversation between two of your favorite historical writers, then invent a dialogue between them after they've imbibed too many rum punch drinks.
2. Compose a scene using your choice of weather as the narrator. Incorporate at least five words Will Dowd used in *Areas of Fog* that you previously did not recognize.
3. "Bare Bones" discusses the painter Andrew Wyeth and the number of forgeries that arose after his death. Hypothesize what Will Dowd meant when he said that the forgery of "Snow Birds" was not painted by someone "whose hands were cold."

Evaluation

1. Think about how “In Stone” is different from the other essays included in *Areas of Fog*. Justify your reasoning for why this essay was included in this collection.
2. The titles of the essays all relate to a person or literary work in some way. These references are often subtle and may take a bit of digging to uncover the treasure. Choose four titles (one from each season) and discuss the correlation of the title to the content of the essay.
3. Dowd mentions various people from history who harbored secrets. Choose one of these famous people and assess how the secret helped or hindered his or her success.
4. The essay “An Inner Scheme” includes an actual inner scheme, a literary code that involves Vladimir Nabokov. Solve the secret message that is imbedded in this essay.
5. If you were the editor of *Areas of Fog*, are there essays you would exclude from the collection? Justify your reasoning.

Book Groups

1. “London Town” is the opening essay. In this piece, Will Dowd discusses the literary merits of fog. What other stories can you think of which prominently feature fog?
2. In the section titled, “Carry On,” Dowd compares the blizzard to war. Discuss the similarities between the two.
3. Also in “Carry On,” Dowd describes the “Southie Parking Wars.” Discuss the idea of the gentleman’s agreement. Why do you think Dowd states, “Whoever has the audacity to leave an old shoe must be a trained killer”?
4. In “Latitudes,” Dowd asks “Why do I live here?” Was there ever a time when you felt the same way about where you live? Has weather ever ruined an event for you?
5. “Bare Bones” discusses the painter Andrew Wyeth and the number of forgeries that arose after his death. What do you think Will Dowd meant when he said the forgery of “Snow Birds” was not painted by someone “whose hands were cold”?
6. In “Beach Walk,” do you agree with Dowd’s statement, “To sit on a seawall and stare morosely into the ocean is one of life’s great pleasures”? Can you remember the last time you sat near the ocean? Is it just the ocean that allows you to cast a line of thoughts? Would a lake or river suffice as well?

7. In "Narcissus," Will Dowd says spring doesn't care about the theme of resurrection. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not?
8. Why do you think the title is "Narcissus"?
9. Also in "Narcissus," Dowd mentions a powerful question asked by one of his professors: "How many more springs will each of you get?" Discuss the profound way this question puts everyday life into perspective.
10. Consider the phrase, "Carpe Diem." Dowd claims we don't seize the day, the day seizes us. Do you agree or disagree?
11. In "Orange Peels," a medium tells Dowd that she sees the spirit of a heavy-set female relative trying to hand him books. At first, he shrugs it off, claiming that none of his female relatives fit this description. As he is flying home, he begins to consider what his great-grandmother looked like. What do you think he discovered when he looked through his old family photos?
12. How are "Orange Peels," "Narcissus," and "Ocean Sounds" different from other essays in this book?
13. Describe the way(s) weather is a unifier for people.
14. Dowd doesn't just write about the weather. What do you view as other themes in the book?
15. Choose a selection that resonated with you. Discuss why it had such an impact on you.
16. Discuss examples of how Dowd uses personification when describing the weather.
17. If you were the editor, are there essays you would exclude from the collection? Why?
18. Dowd wanted the book to be light, fun and communal. Do you think he succeeded? Why or why not?
19. After reading the book, do you feel that *Areas of Fog* is a fitting title? If not, what title might you have chosen?
20. Writing about the weather for a year could prove exhaustive. Other than precipitation and temperature, what other weather phenomena were mentioned in the essays?

21. The titles of the essays all relate in some way to a famous historical person or literary work. These references are often subtle and may take a bit of digging to uncover the treasure. Consider some of the titles and discuss their correlation to the content of the essays.
22. Dowd mentions various people from history who harbored deep secrets. Choose one of these famous people and discuss how the secret helped or hindered his or her success.
23. Dowd cleverly imbeds historical knowledge into his musings about the weather. List three things you learned from reading these essays.
24. Dowd uses comedy to balance the sometimes serious nature of weather. Choose an essay that combines seriousness with humor. What makes the opposing elements work in your chosen essay?
25. Discuss the essays that touch upon human frailty. How does Dowd convey his message?
26. In each essay, Dowd deftly incorporates facts and stories about history. Which essays accomplish this most effectively?
27. Discuss three examples of imagery that stuck with you.
28. The essay "An Inner Scheme" includes an actual inner scheme, a literary code that involves Vladimir Nabokov. Were you able to figure out Dowd's secret message? (If you're stuck, consider what Nabokov told his editor.)
29. "The Wood, The Weed, The Wag" is only three sentences long. How do you think Dowd crafts such a long sentence without becoming monotonous?
30. In "Rara Avis," who do you believe is the Rara Avis referred to in the title?
31. How is happiness dependent upon the weather? Do you make goals according to seasons?
32. In "The Silent W," Dowd discusses nomen est omen, the concept that our name is our destiny. Do you agree with this idea?
33. In "The Painter of Sunflowers" and "High and Dry," how is the sun depicted differently?

34. Do you agree with Dowd that *The Great Gatsby* and other classic works of literature change as you age?
35. In the “Outro,” Will Dowd includes a haiku from the poet Issa. Do you think the poem was an appropriate way to end the book? Would you agree the fog of his writer’s block has lifted?
36. The cover image for *Areas of Fog* is titled “Cloud Cleaner.” How does this resonate with the lyrical nature of the essays?

English Language Arts Standards (Compiled by NCTE and IRA)

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.

8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).