



Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing

By Lydia Peelle
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Introduction

With this first book of fiction, a gifted writer brings together eight superbly crafted stories that peer deeply into the human heart, exploring lives derailed by the loss of a vital connection to the land and to the natural world of which they are a part.

"Mule Killers" evokes the end of an era and of a grandfather's dreams when he decides to replace animal power on his farm with tractors. Two restless young girls in "Sweethearts of the Rodeo" live out their last summer of innocence, riding ponies recklessly and spying on their boss and the wealthy women who visit him. In "Phantom Pain," the Tennessee woods are a sliver of what they once were, men now hunt with GPS and cell phones, and the rumor of a dangerous panther on the loose stirs up a small town.

An unexpected vision of the beauty and mystery of life redeems the darkest moments in this stellar debut collection, a book that readers will want to read and reread.

Questions for Discussion

1. Most of *Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing* is set in rural locales. What techniques did Peelle use to give these stories their "everyman" quality, despite settings that may be far removed from the reader's own experiences? Of these eight stories, only the title story takes place in an urban setting why might Peelle have placed "Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing" in a city, and how did it contribute to your impression of the collection?
2. "Kidding Season" ends with the words "*He has lost something.*" What, in your opinion, has Charlie lost?
3. Many of Peelle's characters idealize youth. At the same time, they find themselves in shifting rural landscapes as new technology changes, and even threatens, their agricultural communities. How does Peelle handle these related themes? Is youth valued in these stories?
4. In many cases, we don't learn the names of these stories' protagonists. Did you notice as you read? Did you find Peelle's narrators relatable? Which character made the biggest impression on you?
5. What is Tanya's function in "Phantom Pain"?
6. Dub and the protagonist of "The Still Point." The duo of "Reasons for and Advantages of Breathing." The horse-riding girls in "Sweethearts of the Rodeo." What is the role of friendship in the lives of Peelle's characters? How is friendship defined in this collection?
7. Consider the epilogue of "Shadows on a Weary Land," and the themes it includes: revolution and loss, building and bulldozing, hope and revelation. Is this a fitting end to the story? To the collection?
8. Through her work, Peelle seeks to reemphasize our now-tenuous sense of responsibility for the natural world, the loss of which she sees as the major challenge facing this generation. As you read, when did that goal resonate most? More generally, do you believe that story can effect a change in consciousness? What are some other examples of fiction that changed the way you look at and interact with your own world?

About the Author

Lydia Peelle was born in Boston. Her short stories have appeared in numerous publications and have won two Pushcart Prizes, an O. Henry Award, and been twice featured in *Best New American Voices*. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee.