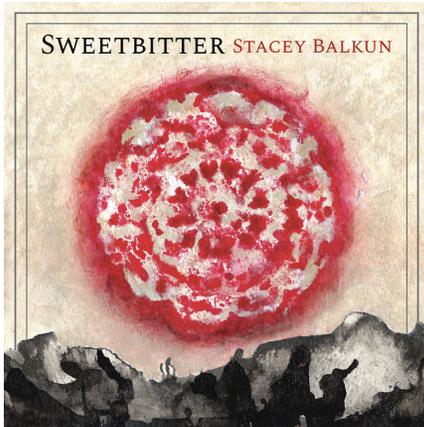


Sweetbitter Teaching Guide



Stacey Balkun's debut full-length collection, *Sweetbitter*, is an examination of youth, gender, sexuality, and yearning at an atomic level. The collection reads like a fever dream as Balkun uncovers the radioactive darkness that hides beneath the earth's surface and how it seeps into the lives of those who come near. The speaker takes us with them into the wilderness, wanting the world to be perceived differently, begging to be seen as more. From sapphic longing and poisoned baptisms to contaminated bodies and the gendered erosion of autonomy, *Sweetbitter* is the product of a restless coming-of-age story. In it, puberty is swimming in a toxic pond and recklessness is disguised as control. With Balkun's hazy, dream-like storytelling, the speaker is a wild creature challenging the social confines of being human, being girl. *Sweetbitter* is a gripping, sometimes suspenseful, poetry collection that leaves you hungry for more.

Sweetbitter

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Learn more at www.staceybalkun.com/sweetbitter

Discussion Questions

1. *Sweetbitter's* speakers are informed by story. What are some of the stories they know, and how do those stories affect their coming-of-age? What power does story hold?
2. Who is Apple-Child? What is the relationship between the two girls? What external and/or internal factors shape this relationship?
3. What is the environmental situation? How does the environmental damage reflect or connect to the girls' situation?
4. What are some of the poetic forms in *Sweetbitter*? How do the poems adhere to the form's strict rules, or break from them? Why?

Essay Topics

1. What themes are in *Sweetbitter*? Pick one of the themes, and write an essay arguing how the form and content of the poems exemplify that theme. Support your argument with evidence and analysis.
2. Compare and contrast one of Balkun's erasure poems to the original song lyrics. What do they have in common, and how do they differ? How does the erasure highlight a deeper, darker, or hidden part of the song? Use evidence from the text to support your analysis.
3. *Sweetbitter* is an example of queer ecology. What is queer ecology, and how is it reflected in these poems? Use analysis and evidence from the text to support your argument.
4. Read Muriel Rukeyser's "The Book of the Dead." What similarities do you see between this poem and Balkun's "The Book of Red"? Compare and contrast these two long poems. Use analysis and evidence from the text to support your argument.

Creative Writing Prompts:

1. Erasure: Several of the poems in *Sweetbitter* are examples of erasure: removing text from an existing document to shape a poem. Erasures can draw out hidden stories or otherwise create new perspectives on existing texts. Balkun erases song lyrics to reveal narratives hidden within the music. Pick a song that meant a lot to you growing up, or means a lot to you now. Print three copies of it and create three different erasures by removing words.
2. Litany: "Plants I Didn't Know Until After" is a list poem, but it tells an implicit story. Think of a moment or a place that was meaningful for you, a moment or place that changed everything. Think of that environment: what surrounded you? Choose one object and list all of the types you can think of. Do some research, and list more. Shape that list into a poem, and add a title that implies some sort of narrative or emotional situation.
3. Sonnets: "We Could Go Alone as Long as We Were Home Before Dark" is a sonnet-like poem of memory of Halloween. Think of a holiday memory, and generate a list of sensory images. Use all five senses: sight, smell, sound, touch, and taste. Write a poem about this memory that incorporates all of these images. Shape it into a sonnet, or let it be a longer poem.
4. Contrapuntal: Take a draft of any poem that you have written and divide it into two (or more) columns with a gap running down the page between. Revise it until the lines work across and down.

Sample Poems

Once Upon a Time, There Were Two Girls

in the suburbs. One was a half-
girl and the other whole.

Through the woods,
they shimmered, telling stories

that sparkled like the radio
like the oil-slicked creek.

In the beginning,
they said,

*The crabapple birthed
a baby girl*

or

*The story goes
Lilith molded from the red*

*clay earth then Eve wrenched
from Adam's rib.*

They laughed
and they laughed. There,

no bear or blackberry,
just bramble. They believed

mothers plucked babies
from trees, wondered

if they'd ever want
for a man, even a kind one

cursed. How could there be
such thing as *happily*

ever after
when after all, all girls

have been swayed
by a forked tongue, held

captive as a crown?

Plants I Didn't Know Until After

Sycamore and sweetgum gifting their spiky pods.
Blue hydrangeas blooming like moons.
Turkey fig, delicious waddle and spread of each huge leaf.
Cypress with its elbows and knees gasping for air.
Joshua tree propheting along the side of the highway.
Bird of paradise and its violent beaks.
Juniper berries before they're crushed into gin.
Apple-pear bearing fruit that's both and neither.

Loquat which I still don't understand.
White peach and the pit's bloody center.
Blood orange with its red juice running.
Confederate jasmine trying to smudge the night clean.
Kumquat and the crunch of rind under dull teeth,
how wicked it feels to eat each orange whole.

We Could Go Alone as Long as We Were Home Before Dark

For Halloween, I decide I'm Daphne
but everyone thinks I'm a tree
since Apple-Child is Eve, though it's so cold
she must wear a sweater over her leaves.

The twigs in her hair seem accidental,
like she had tumbled into me. We trick-or-treat
by the river, then at the new development
edging Union Carbide land, fenced off

from the condos where we can ring
two doorbells at once. My root-legs move slow.
She crunches dry leaves underfoot.
A neighbor gives us each a candied apple

and I hold mine to my lips, deciding
to lick or bite. It's the most delicious thing.

A Forest (II)

The Cure

Come closer and see
See into the trees
Find the **girl**
While you can
Come closer and see
See into the dark
Just **follow** your eyes
Just **follow** your eyes
I hear her voice
Calling **my** name
The sound is deep
In the dark
I hear her **voice**
And start to run
Into the trees
Into the trees
Into the trees
Suddenly I stop
But I know **it's too late**
I'm lost in a forest
All alone
The girl was never there
It's always the same
I'm running towards nothing
Again and again and again and again...

Wilderness

Sleater-Kinney

Kenny and Linda **on the way** to Chelan
Transmission's shot, no **back** up plan
Will they hitch a ride?
Or get into a fight?
Moved to the West Coast
Packed up their things
The winters are gray
Now so are the dreams
They tried, to make it all right
All our little wishes have gone dry
Made it to the water, waded in the lies
When we felt the heat
Couldn't turn it into fire
Too caught up in our own **desires**
Said "I Do" in the month of May
Said "I Don't" just the very next day
Will they try again?
Or is it doom for them?
Moved to a city
Where hippies run wild
Everything's white
Now so are the smiles
They tried, to fight the good fight
We're **split** right **in half**
It's making me crazy
A two-headed brat
Tied to the other for life
A family feud
The red and the blue now
It's truth against truth
I'll see you in hell, I don't mind

Lure

Before the boys came with Milwaukee's Best
the boys came with bottle rockets
and before that books of matches
they'd flare tossed in our hair
just to hear us screech
and before the boys came with
Leathermans the boys came
with sticks they'd use to poke
at the backs of our knees at our thighs and once
we went fishing together, popcorn
tied to a shoelace we'd take turns
dragged through the creek they swore it
every bite all was theirs
reeled in fighting
for breath through the shallows
even
then of course we knew
who was the hunter
who was the prey

Conservation Effort

a cento

Night covers the pond with its wing.
No place to go now but into deep ground.

Absences allow us one power over them:
you have to imagine a shadow hill hiding inside.

The water is a mess.
The world is blue at its edges and in its depths.

The water seems suspended,
the geese flying low over the marsh.

We say of them what we want,
reaching out for the unlimited.

Even now this landscape is assembling:
it's truth against truth.

Sometimes we miss the things we have lost,
even if we love the water we swim in now.