

A Reading and Discussion Guide

Poetry Winner – 20th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

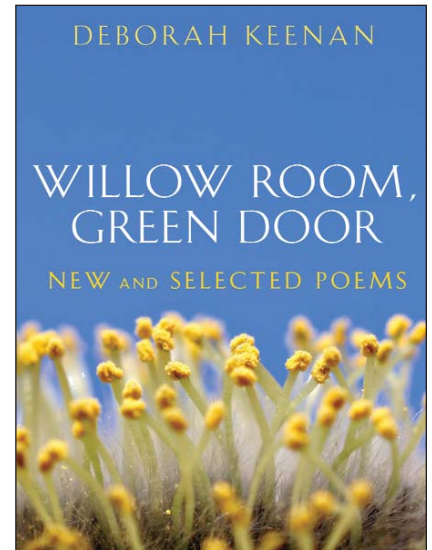
***Willow Room, Green Door* by Deborah Keenan**

Milkweed Editions

Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library.

SUMMARY:

Written over the course of three decades, *Willow Room, Green Door* addresses themes of love and rage, vulnerability and authority, and distraction and focus. This collection invites the reader to inhabit the world with the poet, walking through time, both historical and personal. The poems address the struggles to keep feeling, remain loyal, and live with integrity through times of trial and bliss alike.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the collection's strongest theme? To what extent do themes and connections tie the eight books together?
 2. To what extent does this poet seek connection with others, including her readers?
 3. What images does the poet use to locate herself in landscape, in kinship, and as a citizen?
 4. What signals does the poet send about the spiritual life, about religion, God, and a sacred path?
 5. How does the figure of the father shift and alter over the eight books?
 6. Which character is the poet most protective of with her language?
 7. What value and meaning do you see in the structures the poet chose for her poems?
 8. Has Deborah Keenan purposefully left anything out of her poems over the past 30+ years?
 9. What emotions, images, and memories does the collection conjure up for you?
 10. Which poem speaks most directly to you, and why?
 11. If you wrote a collection of poetry during 30+ years of your life, how would the tone, images, and presentation of themes change over the years?
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A CONVERSATION WITH DEBORAH KEENAN:

Q. What inspired you to write *Willow Room, Green Door*?

In the summer of 2005 I had less assigned work, and a bit more freedom to do my artistic work. I decided to create a book-length poem in which I reflected on years of art and writing notebooks I've kept, on memories of a personal life, and on whatever politics, culture, the war, and the weather dealt me from June 1 to September 1 that summer. I wrote sections of that new long poem each day, after early morning sessions of reading the paper, looking through my notebooks, and considering what each day was handing me as material for my poem.

Fortunately Milkweed Editions responded positively when I sent them my new long poem and asked if they would consider using it as a launching place for a "New and Selected" collection covering the past 30 years of my writing life.

Q. What challenges did you encounter with this collection?

I wanted a new structure for the long poem. I had written long poems before, "Grace" and "Happiness," but I wanted to find a new way to get at memory and culture. One challenge was to truly trust my instincts as a poet, to let the sections of the long poem arrive, in whatever length, with whatever vision unfolded. A primary challenge for me always is to put aside daily obligations enough to just make my art.

Q. What do you hope readers take away from *Willow Room, Green Door*?

I hope my readers will see a human being in late middle age pondering the meaning and value of her life as a citizen, wife, mother, friend and teacher. I hope they will experience how all of these roles present their own challenges and joys. I hope they will see a writer trying to stay on the path of art-making, and on the path of speaking out about what matters in this world. More than anything, I want my readers to find poems that they really care about, and that they share those with friends and kin.

Q. What do you like most about this award-winning collection?

I love the stunning cover and design created by Christian Fünfhausen, an amazing designer who also designed my book, *Good Heart*. I appreciate the acknowledgement that I never abandoned poetry over the years; that I kept writing and seeking publication. I love the way that the new long poem leads the way into the collection, and that we then drop back to my first books, written when I was in my twenties. This structure lays down a good path for my readers to follow.

Q. How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?

I started writing when I was 19. I was newly married, living in Scotland, and sick in a daily way living through my first pregnancy. I began painting, drawing, writing small poems for my first child, and keeping my first artist notebooks. When I came back to the United States, I was committed to a vision of myself as a public writer, and I have rarely stopped writing since.

Q. How do you most enjoy spending your time when you're not writing?

I spend time with my friends and family, including my sweet granddaughter Aisling. I walk each day, garden, knit, work on collages (some I sell, others I save for family and friends), listen to music, and watch plenty of good and bad TV. I enjoy staring out windows, and absolutely love teaching.

ABOUT DEBORAH KEENAN:

Among other awards, Deborah Keenan has received two Bush Foundation Fellowships, an NEA Fellowship, and the Loft-McKnight Poet of Distinction Award. *Willow Room, Green Door* is the author's seventh poetry collection, and she also co-authored the collection, *How We Missed Belgium*, with Jim Moore. Keenan is a professor and faculty advisor in the Graduate Liberal Studies School at Hamline University. She has four children and lives in Saint Paul. Her poetry collections include:

Kingdoms, 2006

Good Heart, 2003

Happiness, 1995



The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Office of the Mayor of Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Public Library. Visit us online at www.thefriends.org.

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