

## A CONVERSATION WITH JUDE NUTTER

### What inspired you to write your award-winning collection?

The poems at the core of the book (the ones that explore my connections to Bergen-Belsen Concentration Camp) have been around, in one form or another, for some time. They pushed me into exploring the whole idea of “bearing witness” and remembering the dead; which, in turn, led me to the whole concept of the poem as a means of *resurrecting* the dead. I used Whitman’s quote about the Civil War dead (“The dead to me mar not...”) as something to push against throughout the whole collection. It’s important to understand that I’m not *arguing* with Whitman here; I’m simply trying to formulate my own responses to war and remembrance.

### What research did you undertake in writing *I Wish I Had a Heart Like Yours, Walt Whitman*?

I’ve been visiting Germany (where I grew up) every spring for several years, in order to revisit the haunts of my childhood and make use of the archives at the Bergen-Belsen Documentation Centre. As a European, my sense of history is very visceral—there is no landscape in Europe that is not haunted by war—so simply returning

to Europe and being in the physical landscape is, in itself, a form of research for me.

### What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing the collection?

My main concern was that I would not appropriate or diminish the experiences of those who have been the direct victims of war and persecution. I use the childhood self—the insect collector, who I regard as my alter ego—to chart my own very personal journey into historical awareness.

We are told by the culture at large that if we haven’t experienced a war or conflict, then we have no right to speak out, or claim knowledge. I don’t believe this, and to paraphrase what I say in one of the poems: “who among us was born into a world without war?” I had to silence those voices that were telling me I had no authority to write about war and conflict. War affects us all; we all have the authority to articulate the ways it impacts our lives and our thinking.

### What do you like most about *I Wish I Had a Heart Like Yours, Walt Whitman*?

The way it came together: the “war” poems and the “nature” poems interwoven.

I’ve always wanted to structure a collection that uses my childhood experiences of growing up in Germany as a way into other concerns, and this happened here.

### What was your journey to becoming a published poet?

I didn’t choose or decide to become a writer! I knew as a child, that I lived in—and through—language. There was never any other option for me. To not write, to not work hard at my craft, would have been a kind of death.

### How do you enjoy spending time when you’re not writing?

Dare I say that I’m miserable when I’m not writing?! It’s true—those times between poems are agony. You have to trust that the muse will return; you have to turn to the world and be receptive. I love to walk and I love to read. I watch a lot of foreign films. I spend time with friends. I loaf a lot, as Whitman said we must do!



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A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards/ The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

22ND ANNUAL

# MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

Poetry Winner



I WISH I HAD A HEART  
LIKE YOURS, WALT WHITMAN

POEM # 27

Jude Nutter

*I Wish I Had a Heart Like Yours, Walt Whitman*

by Jude Nutter

UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME PRESS

# I Wish I Had a Heart Like Yours, Walt Whitman



## SUMMARY:

In this collection, the poet invokes, invites and revises Walt Whitman's civil war poems through contemporary and female perspectives. Through expansive, passionate lyrics full of clarity, imagination and sureness of vision, the poems bridge the gap between past and present, loss and reclamation.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the collection's main themes?
2. What is the meaning of the book's title, and why do you think the poet chose this particular title?
3. Poetry is often the genre of choice for exploring personal and cultural upheaval. Why is this? What is it about poetry, about how poetry uses language, that makes it ideal for the act of "bearing witness"?
4. The Bergen-Belsen poems all begin with the same stanza. Why do you think the poet has used this device? What effects does it create?
5. How do the poems that open and close the book ("Lamb" and "Wolves") frame the collection? How are these poems linked, both in terms of tone and subject?
6. In her review of the book, the poet Deborah Keenan writes that these poems explore and chart what war "accomplishes and destroys." How do you see this being manifest in individual poems and the collection as a whole?

7. Which poem do you find most intriguing? What is it about this poem that interests you in light of its subject and structure and the larger philosophical questions it raises?
8. In what ways does the work of Walt Whitman inform this collection? Discuss the influence of his war poems and of his general aesthetic.
9. What emotions did you experience while reading the collection?
10. What experiences have you had with war, and did the poems conjure up any memories?

## About Jude Nutter

Jude Nutter has been published in numerous journals and is the recipient of several national and international poetry awards. Her second collection, *The Curator of Silence*, won both



a Minnesota Book Award and the Ernest Sandeen Prize in 2007. Jude was born in North Yorkshire, England and grew up in northern Germany. She now lives in Edina.

Visit [www.judenutter.net](http://www.judenutter.net) to learn more about the poet and her work.



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