

A CONVERSATION WITH PATRICIA KIRKPATRICK

What inspired you to write *Odessa*?

In 2006 I received a writing fellowship and began traveling to western Minnesota to see and write about the prairie. A year later I was diagnosed with a brain tumor and underwent surgery for a non-malignant meningioma. As I recovered, my challenge was to link my experience with the subjects of history, natural history, and neuroscience. I became fascinated by the overlapping language of geography and anatomy: words like *core*, *current*, *stem*, *fissure*, *wall*, *map*, *dome*, *lobe*, *layer*, and *mantle*. I also wanted to put the Persephone myth in a Midwestern setting.

What research did you undertake in writing your award-winning book?

I travelled and visited the prairie; I also read poetry, history, natural history, neuroscience, and memoirs about brain trauma and recovery.

What do you like most about this collection?

I'm pleased that *Odessa* uses a variety of forms and voices to explore what I once heard someone call experience at "the site of a tearing," whether personal or communal. For me *Odessa* is

a lyric notebook of voices "in extremis;" voices and utterances which, in the process of "changing the place home is," encounter wonder and terror and are forced to confront change.

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

I wrote poetry as a child, starting in second grade, under the influence of a wonderful teacher. Then for a long time, in high school and college, I didn't write at all. In my senior year of college I decided I wanted to be a poet. Since then there have been long, difficult periods of silence yet every major decision in my life has been influenced by the desire to write. I mostly have made my living as a teacher and an editor; I've also published essays, reviews, interviews, and curricula.

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How does being a Minnesotan and the particular community in which you live inform your writing?

I moved here after college, understanding that writers were here. The literary community has grown in range, numbers, and diversity since then but writers and readers continue to be here, as well as libraries, museums, book stores, theaters, and support for the arts. I was active in Marly Rusoff's Dinkytown bookstore as the Loft was being formed; moved to San Francisco for ten years, then returned.

I've taught in various colleges, been a board member of the Loft and Saint Paul Almanac, and worked with writers in the Hmong, Dakota, and Somali communities. I appreciate the contributions of publications like *Water-Stone Review*, where I was poetry editor for ten years, *Hungry Mind Review*, and *Riverbank Review*. I've walked the prairie and swam in the lakes, and I've been fortunate to receive grants and fellowships for my work.

These experiences, landscapes, and communities have sustained me as a writer, deepened my commitment to language and literacy, and informed my understanding of how art can inform daily life.

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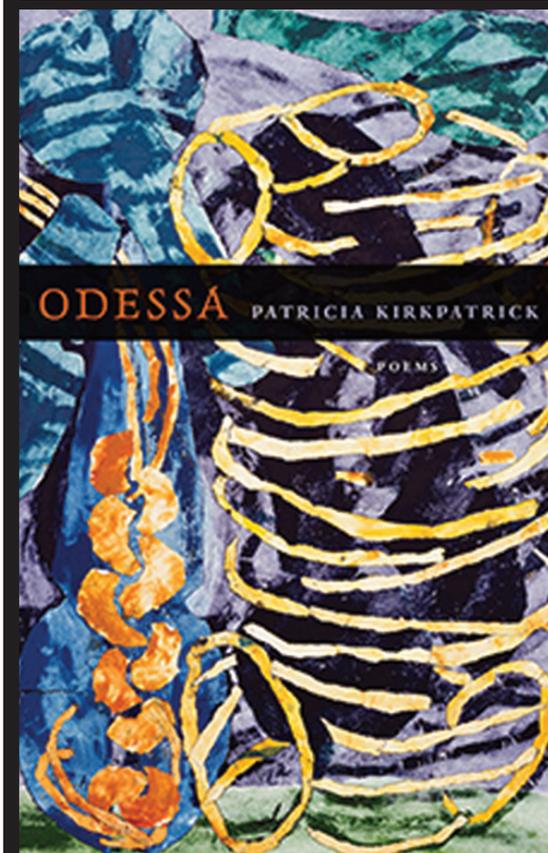
A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards & The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library

25th Annual



Poetry Winner

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Odessa

by Patricia Kirkpatrick

MILKWEED EDITIONS

Odessa



SUMMARY

A grim prognosis, brain cancer, leaves the speaker in Partrica Kirkpatrick's *Odessa* fighting for her life. The tumor presses against her amygdalae, the "emotional core of the self," and central to the process of memory. In poems emotionally charged but void of sentimentality, Kirkpatrick creates from loss a dreamlike reality. *Odessa*, "roof of the underworld," a refuge at once real and imagined, resembles simultaneously the Midwestern prairie and a mythical god-inhabited city. In lines bearing shades of Classical heroism, Kirkpatrick delivers a personal narrative of stunning dimension.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where does your life experience intersect with the poems in *Odessa*?
2. What was your first association with the place name 'Odessa'? Does that association influence your reading of the book?
3. Choose a poem in *Odessa* that most compels or challenges you. What images stay with you from that poem?
4. In your own words, describe this book to a friend. What is *Odessa* about? What links the poems in the book? What about the book most surprised you?
5. What is the consequence of employing different pronouns or points of view in the book?
For example, some poems are written in the first person using the pronoun "I"; other poems are written in the third person using "she."
6. What unique questions does the topic of brain surgery bring up?
7. Where is the sound of the language in *Odessa* most exciting or musical for you?
8. Are you aware of various poetic forms in *Odessa*, such as free verse, the sonnet, or the blues? How do the various forms affect your reading of the poems?
9. How did *Odessa's* references to the Greek/Roman myth of Persephone affect your interpretation of the poems?
10. What did you learn about poetry and language from reading *Odessa*?

ABOUT PATRICIA KIRKPATRICK

The recipient of the first Lindquist & Vennum Prize for Poetry in



2012, Patricia Kirkpatrick is the author of *Century's Road*, as well as several chapbooks of poetry. Her work has appeared widely in journals, including *Poetry*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Threepenny Review*, and *Antioch Review*, and in several anthologies, among them *She Walks in Beauty: A Woman's Journey Through Poems*, edited by Caroline Kennedy.

Learn more about the author at www.patrickirkpatrick.com



Minnesota Department of
Education



The Minnesota Book Awards is a project of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library, with the Saint Paul Public Library and the City of Saint Paul. This project is made possible by a grant from the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services, the primary source of federal support for the nation's 123,000 libraries and 17,500 museums. Through grant making, policy development, and research, IMLS helps communities and individuals thrive through broad public access to knowledge, cultural heritage, and lifelong learning. The grant is administered by the Minnesota Department of Education/State Library Agency, with funding under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA).

Statewide outreach partners include: the Loft Literary Center, Metropolitan Library Service Agency (MELSA); Minnesota Department of Education—State Library Services; Minnesota Educational Media Organization; Minnesota Library Foundation; and Council of Regional Public Library Service Administrators (CRPLSA). Major funding for the Book Awards was provided by the Harlan Boss Foundation for the Arts; the Huss Foundation; the Katherine B. Andersen Fund of The Saint Paul Foundation; the McKnight Foundation; a Library Services and Technology Act grant administered through the Office of State Library Services.

25TH ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS