

INFERNO (a poet's novel) by Eileen Myles

Discussion Questions

1. Eileen Myles the writer and "Eileen Myles" the narrator of INFERNO both identify themselves as a lesbian, a feminist, and a poet: how do these identities shape the work?
2. Why might the writer insist on a book being labeled a novel when it contains identifiably real people (such as Kathy Acker and Patti Smith), and many of its events correspond to "real" places and events?
3. INFERNO is often not written in "standard English." What is the effect of such an approach? If the book had been written with standard punctuation and syntax, how would it read differently? Some themes to touch on include classism, flexibility and improvisation.
4. What role does liberation play in this book? Sexual, social, cultural and financial aspects all deserve mention here.
5. Myles is known as an idiosyncratic writer, as well as one who is very well-read (meaning she's read a lot). Are there other writers whose work you might tie this to? If you're familiar with books which deal with intellectual and sexual awakening such as *Catcher in the Rye*, *Push*, *The Bell Jar*, or *A Boy's Own Story*, what are some of the similarities and differences...?
6. "The Inferno" is a 14th century poem by an Italian, Dante Alighieri. Whether or not you know that poem (which is the first part of a longer epic called "The Divine Comedy"), what relation might "Eileen Myles" the character have to the narrative of Dante, the onlooker who takes a grand tour of Hell? Dante saw many levels of Hell; what might correspond to those different "levels" in Myles' INFERNO?
7. The poet Rae Armantrout has described INFERNO as "a fugue state where life and poem are one: shameful and glorious." What might be "shameful," and what "glorious" in this fictional memoir?
8. Continuing on that theme of a "fugue," Myles herself has mentioned her interest in the "musicality" of language. Is that manifested in INFERNO, and if so, how?

9. The book's epigraph is "The distracted person, too, can form habits," a quote from Walter Benjamin. Benjamin was a German-Jewish philosopher who committed suicide while fleeing the Nazis; he is as well known for his tragic end as for his deeply intellectual aesthetic treatises. What might be some of the connections between Eileen Myles/"Eileen Myles" and the fugitive philosopher? What is the meaning of this quote?
10. Myles has said that the explicit discussion of female genitalia in the book is "a celebration of female sexual power--like the decorations on Aeneas' shield, an excess of 'pussies' becomes protection against oppression, manipulation, and violence." The phallus is often seen as a sword or weapon; discuss.
11. The book has a series of distinct environments: Boston, New York; the country, the city; the novel itself and "Drops," or the grant proposal. What is the effect of these contrasts? What is the effect of seeing the grant proposal?
12. Myles has said that "I think the writing itself is the narrative." This brings to mind the Buddhist concept that the journey is the goal: discuss.