

Readers' Guide for *Bright Dead Things*, by Ada Limón

1. Limón's book "examines the chaos that is life." What are some specific examples of how the "chaos that is life" is demonstrated in these poems? What contributes to their chaotic nature?
2. Limón's poems are also described as having "bravado," "introspection," feminist swagger," and "harrowing terror and loss." In which poems do you find these elements? What images bring these elements to life? How do they make you feel?
3. Look at "The Last Move" (p. 5); "Someplace Like Montana" (p. 16); "State Bird" (p. 19); and "What It Looks Like to Us and the Words We Use" (p. 23), all in Part 1. What words or themes do these poems have in common? Are there any patterns you see? Name some specific examples that unite them in that theme.
4. Look at "Relentless" (p. 34); "The Riveter" (36); "After You Toss Around the Ashes" (p. 39); and "The Long Ride" (p. 44), all in Part 2. What words or themes do these poems have in common? Are there any patterns you see? Name some specific examples that unite them in that theme.
5. Look for other poems with common words or elements, for example, horses, other creatures, cities.
6. Limón tells us that "Lashed to the Helm, All Stiff and Stark" is "After 'The Wreck of the Hesperus,'" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Compare the two poems. (See "The Wreck," below.) Do you see a common theme? Why do you think Limón compares her poem with Longfellow's, and how do you know? What is the significance of the *italicized* phrases in Limón's poem? Are there any repeated images that are in both?

The Wreck of the Hesperus

By Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

It was the schooner Hesperus,
That sailed the wintry sea;
And the skipper had taken his little daughtèr,
To bear him company.

Blue were her eyes as the fairy-flax,
Her cheeks like the dawn of day,
And her bosom white as the hawthorn buds,
That ope in the month of May.

The skipper he stood beside the helm,
His pipe was in his mouth,
And he watched how the veering flaw did blow
The smoke now West, now South.

Then up and spake an old Sailòr,
Had sailed to the Spanish Main,
"I pray thee, put into yonder port,
For I fear a hurricane.

"Last night, the moon had a golden ring,
And to-night no moon we see!"
The skipper, he blew a whiff from his pipe,
And a scornful laugh laughed he.

Colder and louder blew the wind,
A gale from the Northeast,
The snow fell hissing in the brine,
And the billows frothed like yeast.

Down came the storm, and smote amain
The vessel in its strength;
She shuddered and paused, like a frightened steed,
Then leaped her cable's length.

"Come hither! come hither! my little daughtèr,
And do not tremble so;
For I can weather the roughest gale
That ever wind did blow."

He wrapped her warm in his seaman's coat
Against the stinging blast;
He cut a rope from a broken spar,
And bound her to the mast.

"O father! I hear the church-bells ring,
Oh say, what may it be?"
"'T is a fog-bell on a rock-bound coast!" —
And he steered for the open sea.

"O father! I hear the sound of guns,
Oh say, what may it be?"
"Some ship in distress, that cannot live
In such an angry sea!"

"O father! I see a gleaming light,
Oh say, what may it be?"
But the father answered never a word,
A frozen corpse was he.

Lashed to the helm, all stiff and stark,
With his face turned to the skies,
The lantern gleamed through the gleaming snow
On his fixed and glassy eyes.

Then the maiden clasped her hands and prayed
That savèd she might be;
And she thought of Christ, who stilled the wave
On the Lake of Galilee.

And fast through the midnight dark and drear,
Through the whistling sleet and snow,
Like a sheeted ghost, the vessel swept
Tow'rd's the reef of Norman's Woe.

And ever the fitful gusts between
A sound came from the land;
It was the sound of the trampling surf
On the rocks and the hard sea-sand.

The breakers were right beneath her bows,
She drifted a dreary wreck,
And a whooping billow swept the crew
Like icicles from her deck.

She struck where the white and fleecy waves
Looked soft as carded wool,
But the cruel rocks, they gored her side
Like the horns of an angry bull.

Her rattling shrouds, all sheathed in ice,
With the masts went by the board;
Like a vessel of glass, she stove and sank,
Ho! ho! the breakers roared!

At daybreak, on the bleak sea-beach,
A fisherman stood aghast,
To see the form of a maiden fair,
Lashed close to a drifting mast.

The salt sea was frozen on her breast,
The salt tears in her eyes;
And he saw her hair, like the brown sea-weed,
On the billows fall and rise.

Such was the wreck of the Hesperus,
In the midnight and the snow!
Christ save us all from a death like this,
On the reef of Norman's Woe!

7. Take a look at the structure of *Bright Dead Things*. How is the book divided? As you complete each Part, what are your thoughts about what you have read in each section?
8. Did you find the poem that contained the title of the poetry collection? If not, look at "I Remember the Carrots." How does this poem shed light on the book's overall theme? How does the title as portrayed within the poem shed light on the book's overall theme?
9. Choose one or two poems that you really enjoyed. Hubpages.com suggests several ways to examine poetry. Try paraphrasing each poem. Ask yourself what the poem is attempting to do, for example, educate the reader or evoke sympathy. What is the tone of the poem? Who is the speaker? What words cause you to think this? Point out words that stand out to you, and explain why they stand out. Look at the imagery in the poem. Is there any structure to the imagery? Is there any structure to the way the poem is printed on the page? Look for any examples of metaphor, personification, or other figurative language. How does this process of examining the poem help you understand the poem better?
10. Write out a few sentiments about Limón's poetry explaining what you've enjoyed about it. What emotions did her images evoke in your mind or heart? Why?
11. You might enjoy hearing Ada Limón reading her own poetry at the 2015 National Book Awards ceremony. Take a look at this 6-minute video online at this web address:
http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2015_p_limon.html#.Vt5hCDYnLdk