

Study Guide: Jehanne Dubrow's *Dots & Dashes*

General Questions for Writing, Discussion, and Review

1. What associations do you bring to the book's title?
2. ***Dots & Dashes*** is divided into three sections whose titles come from Morse Code: "please stand by," "calling any station," and "over." What do these three titles tell you about the book's emotional and narrative structure? Where else do you find references to Morse Code in the collection?
3. What kinds of dots and dashes do you see throughout the book? What purposes do these markings serve?
4. ***Dots & Dashes*** functions as a sequel to Jehanne Dubrow's third poetry collection, *Stateside* (Northwestern UP, 2010), which looks at the before, during, and after of a deployment. Here is a sample poem from *Stateside*:

Against War Movies

I see my husband shooting in *Platoon*,
and there he is again in *M*A*S*H* (how weird
to hear him talk like Hawkeye Pierce), and soon
I spot him everywhere, his body smeared
with mud, his face bloodied. He's now the star
of every ship blockade and battle scene—
The Fighting 69th, *A Bridge Too Far*,
Three Kings, *Das Boot*, and *Stalag 17*.
In *Stalingrad* he's killed, and then
he's killed in *Midway* and *A Few Good Men*.
He's burned or gassed, he's shot between the eyes,
or shoots himself when he comes home again.
Each movie is a training exercise,
a scenario for how my husband dies.

How does ***Dots & Dashes*** continue to examine a military spouse's fears of her husband's death? What other kinds of fears does *Dots & Dashes* explore?

Questions About Part One: “please stand by”

1. “Reading Poetry on Maryland Public Radio” explores the ways in which a military spouse’s political beliefs may be at odds with her desire to support her husband. How does the speaker choose to prioritize these conflicting demands? What is the impact on the speaker’s marriage?
2. “To a Navy Wife in Maryland” is the first of seven poems that engage with Mary Barnard’s translations of the ancient Greek poet, Sappho. How would you describe the voice and texture of these Sappho-inspired poems? What purpose do these poems serve in the collection?
3. “USS *Ronald Reagan*” is a sestina, a fixed form that follows a very strict pattern of repetition. Identify the six repeating end words (known as “teutons”) that the poem uses. What is the effect of repeating these six words? What does the poem’s use of repetition tell us about the speaker’s anxieties and concerns when it comes to her husband’s military service?
4. “Much Tattooed Sailor Aboard USS *New Jersey*” begins with a description of a famous image taken by World War II photographer Charles Fenno Jacobs. How does the poem move between describing the photograph and meditating on the speaker’s husband? Where are some of the places in the poem where you see art and personal experience intersecting or overlapping?

Questions About Part Two: “calling any station”

1. “From the Pentagon” is one of many sonnets in *Dots & Dashes*. How does the poem work within the sonnet tradition? What is the effect of creating rhymes such as “Pentagon” and “bonbon,” “submarine” and “praline,” or “plane” and “cellophane?”
2. “Homeport” is, in part, an homage to a very famous poem by Robert Hayden:

Those Winter Sundays

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I’d wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he’d call,

and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Where do you find connections between the two poems? Where does "Homeport" move away from its source material?

3. The difficulty of communication is an important concern of ***Dots & Dashes***. Which poems provide examples of civilians and those in the military community struggling to speak to one another? What kind of resolution to this problem does the book offer (if any)?

Questions About Part Three: "over"

1. "Casualty Notification" begins with an epigraph from a poem by Emily Dickinson. Beyond the epigraph, how does Dickinson's work inform this poem? Where else in the collection do you feel Dickinson's influence?
2. "The Long Deployment" is a villanelle, a fixed form that contains two refrains and two rhymes. Villanelles are frequently used to address obsessions, anxieties, or problems without solutions. In "The Long Deployment," how does the repetition of sounds and phrases mimic a mind's worried movements? A standard villanelle is a nineteen-line poem. "The Long Deployment" contains an additional six lines. Why did the poet choose to extend the length of this poem?
3. "Asking and Telling"—a poem that considers the consequences of the now-defunct "Don't ask, don't tell" (DODT) policy—contains several off-color Navy jokes. What is the function of humor in this poem and others in ***Dots & Dashes***?
4. In "Liberty" the speaker is surprised to discover that she feels more comforted by a quilt she made than she does by her husband's presence, observing, "it was what I'd sewn / myself that held, miraculous, /our warmth—his face now a pattern / indecipherable if viewed up close." What does this poem have to say about the power of art? Throughout ***Dots & Dashes***, how is the speaker sustained by her role, not as a military spouse but as a maker of art?