

Study Guide:

Jehanne Dubrow's *American Samizdat*

General Questions for Writing, Discussion, and Review

1. The word “samizdat” is defined as “the clandestine copying and distribution of literature banned by the state, especially formerly in the communist countries of eastern Europe.” Knowing this, what do you imagine an American samizdat might be? Under what conditions could samizdat become a necessary form of publication in the United States?
2. *American Samizdat* begins with this epigraph by Witold Gombrowicz, which is taken from the exiled Polish writer's diaries: “This singing would be magnificent if the singers were not terrified of it and if one did not sense the tremor in their voices, which arouses pity....In the immense silence, our unconfessed, mute and gagged reality takes shape.” What tone does this quote set? What does it mean for reality to be “mute and gagged?”
3. At the end of *American Samizdat*, the poet explains that the structure of the collection “is informed by Franz Schubert's cycle, *Winterreise*, a series of twenty-four songs based on the poems of Wilhelm Müller.” She goes on to quote the tenor Ian Bostridge, who writes: “Alienation is woven all the way through *Winterreise*. There is the very simple, personal sense of the word—the estrangement which follows a love affair is, after all, the way the cycle starts. But there is also the sort of alienation which makes *Winterreise* a pre-echo of so much of twentieth-century philosophy and literature...Schubert's *Winterreise* is one vessel by which this newborn, fractured, modernity has been transmitted to its even bleaker successors.” In what ways do you see the qualities of estrangement and alienation in *American Samizdat*? What has alienated the speaker in the book? From what is she estranged?

Questions About Form

1. Unlike many contemporary poetry collections, *American Samizdat* isn't divided into sections. How does this impact your experience of reading the book? Why do you think the poem doesn't contain any breaks?
2. *American Samizdat* is comprised entirely of short poems written in couplets. Why do you think the poet choose to work in this form? What is the effect of working in these paired lines?

Questions about Imagery & Themes

1. Televisions, computers, and cell phones appear frequently throughout *American Samizdat*. How do these objects function at different places in the book? How does the speaker feel about technology? In the world of *American Samizdat*, what role does technology play in people's lives?
2. Birds appear frequently in the book. Sometimes the speaker mentions a single bird (as in "And the bird proclaimed"). Sometimes the speaker describes larger groups of birds. What do these creatures represent?
3. Greek mythology, and particularly the story of Clytemnestra, plays an important role in *American Samizdat*. What purpose do these ancient stories serve in the collection? Why is the speaker drawn to mythmaking and to these mythological characters?
4. Several poems in *American Samizdat* refer to an "iron country." What do you think the "iron country" is? What does this place symbolize for the speaker?

Questions about Voice & Point of View

1. What adjectives would you use to describe the voice of the speaker in *American Samizdat*? Is it emotional or detached? Why?
2. Almost all of the poems in *American Samizdat* appear to be spoken by the same person. Occasionally, however, the speaker quotes other voices (for example in "The day in review is a scroll" and in "A voice is saying very fine."). How do you make sense of these other voices? Who is speaking? How is the reader supposed to feel about these other voices?