

Study Guide:

Jehanne Dubrow's *Wild Kingdom*

General Questions for Writing, Discussion, and Review

1. What kinds of associations do you bring to the book's title? What does a "wild kingdom" mean to you? What forms of wildness do you observe in the collection?
2. *Wild Kingdom* is divided into three sections whose titles are inspired by the names of different groups of birds. What do these titles tell you about the book's narrative journey?
3. What kinds of birds do you see throughout the book? What functions do these birds serve?
4. *Wild Kingdom* opens with a poem titled "Syllabus for the Dark Ahead." In the classroom, what is the purpose of a syllabus? What does this poem-as-syllabus tell us about the lessons that will be taught in *Wild Kingdom*?

Questions About Part One: "a colony of gulls / a siege of herons"

1. *Wild Kingdom* contains a number of portraits of different kinds of people who are found in academia, including "Portrait of an Administrator with Strategic Plan and Office Supplies." What do these portraits teach us about the culture of a college or university campus?
2. *Wild Kingdom* includes a series of prose poems offering fictionalized accounts of college honor board hearings. What challenges or traumas do the students in these poems face? What stories do the speakers tell about their own pain? And what is the effect of presenting these imaginary hearings as prose poems, instead of using lineated verse?
3. Jehanne Dubrow has said that *Wild Kingdom* employs what she calls "received academic forms," including the course syllabus, departmental meeting minutes, a grading rubric, scientific field notes, and a course

evaluation. What is the effect of using the structure of such academic documents to craft poems?

4. "Scholar Sharpening His Quill" is an example of ekphrasis: a poem about a work of art. How does the poem move between describing the painting and meditating on an academic colleague? How does the painting allow the speaker to critique her colleague?

Questions About Part Two: "a wake of vultures / a deceit of lapwings"

1. "An Essay on Cruelty" meditates on power, cruelty, and the intersection of small-scale sufferings with larger, national traumas. What is the effect of moving back and forth between personal experience and current events? How do some of the other poems in *Wild Kingdom* do similar work?
2. *Wild Kingdom* includes a sequence of persona poems written in the voices of birds, such as the northern cardinal and the blue-winged teal. In what ways do these birds speak with human voices? How are they impacted by the culture and climate of academia?

Questions About Part Three: "a flight of swallows / an exaltation of larks"

1. "Fairy Tale with Laryngitis and Resignation Letter" brings together the world of the campus with the familiar children's story of The Little Mermaid. What do we learn about the poem's speaker from this unexpected juxtaposition?
2. Poems like "Exit Report" and "Memory of a Year with Allusions to the Greeks engage with Greek mythology? Why does these poems use classical allusions? What do these references bring to the book?
3. *Wild Kingdom* ends with "Song for a Grackle in a Kroger Parking Lot." The poem presents a bird that is able to "to sing and sing despite / the rusted metal of its throat." Where does this final bird's song leave us? In what ways all might poems be acts of rusty singing? How are poets also scavengers?