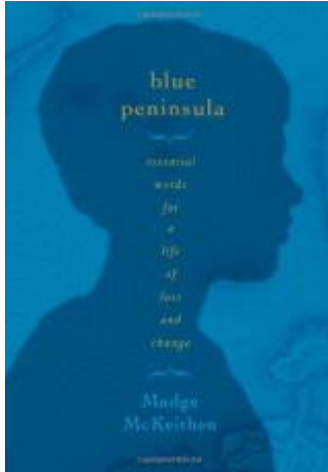


Blue Peninsula: Essential Words for a Life of Loss and Change

by Madge McKeithen



About the Book

Madge McKeithen's son Ike was fourteen years old when he began to have symptoms that seemed outside the parameters of typical growing pains. The medical community was at a loss to give him a definitive diagnosis, but the prognosis was undeniably a challenging one: over the next eight years, McKeithen watched Ike lose his ability to walk, to think clearly, and to live without continual care. A teacher and editor, she found new power in the antidote of poetry—not so much for comfort but for understanding, a way to distill particular truths through words that were by turns unflinching and soothing. In more than thirty succinct, wise chapters, **Blue Peninsula** collects dozens of illuminating poems, accompanied by McKeithen's candid recollections of Ike's unfolding illness.

McKeithen draws on wonderfully wide-ranging poets and lyricists, including Emily Dickinson, Paul Celan, Elizabeth Bishop, Bruce Springsteen, Marie Howe, Walt Whitman, and many others. Some chapters are reflections on friendships and family relationships in the context of a chronic and worsening illness. Some consider making peace with what life has dealt, and others value intentionally reworking it. McKeithen writes that her book "is not about resolution, but about connection." In that spirit, **Blue Peninsula** is a unique work that does not provide easy solace, but aims to keep company.

Discussion Guide

1. In her preface to **Blue Peninsula**, the author reminds us that illness and disability can marginalize people. To what extent are the ill and disabled marginalized in your own community? What makes poetry a good answer to this?
2. What does the book's initial poem, "A Mathematics of Breathing," express about risk and security?

3. Discuss the notion of loss captured by Elizabeth Bishop's poem in the chapter titled "Acquiring Losses." What everyday losses and monumental losses have you experienced? In a typical life, do the gains outnumber the losses?
4. One of the defining traits of Ike's illness is its lack of definition. What are the challenges and advantages of facing an illness that has neither a precise diagnosis nor a clear prognosis? What does McKeithen observe about this uncertainty in the chapter titled "Along with a Life"? In what way do the quotations from the poet and doctor William Carlos Williams underscore the lines of poetry that open this chapter?
5. The author recommends reading her chapters in any order that suits you. Which sections were you drawn to initially? Which poems made you pause the longest? If you read the chapters in sequence, how were you affected by the book's unusual timeline, which mirrors the way memories often emerge?
6. How did your previous perceptions of poetry compare to the approaches described by Billy Collins in the chapter titled "Sensory Illness"? How would you characterize McKeithen's observations and reactions to poetry? In what way does her experience with Ike's illness drift from the realm of logical interpretation?
7. What aspects of **Blue Peninsula** are unique to mothers and motherhood? How might these memories have unfolded if Ike's father or brother had recounted them? Do the book's female poets differ significantly from their male counterparts in terms of voice and imagery?
8. In what way did the author's love of etymology enhance the book? What ironies and surprises did she bring to light in the history of certain words? What makes poetry the ideal medium for illuminating this approach to language?
9. "Looking Again" includes anecdotes about needing bleakness; Nick and his friend Meghan experience catharsis through broken glass, and McKeithen seeks the melancholy weather of a Scottish winter. What is the role of gestures like these, and what makes them more effective than the optimism of well-wishers? What aspects of this experience are captured in C. K. Williams's poem "Tantrum," in the chapter titled "Vividly Inarticulate"?
10. How did the author's years as a teacher shape this book? What have the poets featured in **Blue Peninsula** taught her during those eight years? What wisdom did they hold for you?
11. "Lines to Cross" describes the November day in 1997 that marked the undeniable realization of Ike's illness. From that point forward, how did McKeithen mark the subtle changes in Ike's symptoms? How did her interpretations compare to those of people outside the family, from high school through his courageous weeks at college and afterward? In the preceding chapter, what does the poem "Early Darkness" say about this process?
12. What does McKeithen suggest about the language of poetry in the final paragraph of "Making Light," which reads, "I want the doctors, the teachers, to know the words of Heaney and Yeats and Machado, to know how vital are words often easier left unsaid, how the hard truth can be something you stand on to see a little light"?
13. McKeithen deals directly with the indirect aura of religion, particularly in "Sifting Questions" and "Slanted." How does she reconcile the concepts of a loving God and human suffering? How do you reconcile them? How do the poetic lines of scripture address such contradictions?

14. The poem from which this book takes its title, Emily Dickinson's #405, appears in the last chapter, followed by McKeithen's recollections of her lengthy aversion to the final stanza. Why does humanity sometimes resist the blue peninsula, choosing instead "To fail" with Land in Sight?

15. What makes **Blue Peninsula** distinct from other books you have read about illness and loss? Do any of the book's prose sections read in some ways like poetry?

16. **Blue Peninsula** spans centuries of poetry, from ancient lines to very contemporary ones. Did you find yourself drawn to the works of a particular time period, or to a particular format (structured rhyme scheme or rhythm versus free verse)?

17. What poem can you remember speaking directly to you at an important moment or juncture in your life? Do you think there's a kind of communication poetry achieves better than any other form? Why?

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Author Bio

Madge McKeithen was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and attended the College of William and Mary and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. She has been a teacher, and a researcher and editor for a U.S. congressman and the World Bank. She lives in New York City. **Blue Peninsula** is her first book.

Critical Praise

"Madge McKeithen treats poetry as what Kenneth Burke calls "equipment for living." Poems become her abiding companions as she lives through and confronts her son's devastating unnamed illness. **Blue Peninsula** is a deeply

moving book that, like good poetry itself, disturbs and consoles.?

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