

***Mississippi Meanderings* Discussion Guide with Optional Writing Prompts**

This discussion guide is written to provide background information, questions, and writing prompts to be used in any way that benefits you and/or your group. Questions are arranged primarily by topic in order to facilitate different interests during book club or classroom discussions. Writing prompts are added at the end of each section, for use by classroom teachers, writing groups, book club members interested in going deeper, or other readers interested in writing poems of their own. Please pick and choose to suit your needs.

1. The Beginning

The first poem in this collection describes the sculpture, “Heartwaters,” by Anishinabe artist, Jeff Savage. This sculpture is found at Lake Itasca State Park, where the Mississippi River begins its journey to the sea. The poem, also titled “Heartwaters,” is an example of ekphrastic poetry, a vivid description of a work of art. Often, an ekphrastic poem will display a unique perspective showing the poet’s interpretation or interaction with the work.

- Describe what you think the sculpture looks like. Which words from the poem helped you to picture the work of art?
- What is the tone of the poem? How does it convey a particular feeling about the artwork?

(A picture of the sculpture can be found in the *Mississippi Meanderings* section under the Photos tab of author website, www.barbgeiger.com.)

Try it! Find a painting, sculpture, or other piece of artwork that fascinates you. Observe it, interact with it on different levels, and respond with a poem that describes the artwork in your own creative way. Your poem can be in any form and with a perspective and tone of your choice.

2. Animal Life

Many of the poems in this collection are descriptive of the animal life found in and along the shores of the river ecosystem. Imagery, when done well, can help readers experience what is being described as if they are present themselves.

- What literal or figurative imagery did you find interesting in “Transient Home”, “Boat Ramp Rescue”, “Stump Field Fishing”, or “Pig’s Eye Heron Rookery”?
- Why did you find it interesting? How did it strike you?

(Background information about the comeback of the bald eagle and about Pierre (Pig’s Eye) Parrant can be found in the Blog section at www.barbgeiger.com.)

Sometimes animals can be funny. The poems “Pelican Problems”, “Congeniality”, and “Gators and Snakes” have unique perspectives, which contribute to the humor of the poems.

- Which of the poems had a perspective that was interesting to you?
- Which did you find most entertaining? Why?

“Solitude” was written as a shape poem. The end of each line mimics both the shape of a shoreline and the graceful curve of an egret’s neck, as compared within the poem itself.

- How do you think the shape of the poem helps reinforce the imagery?
- When have you experienced a similar feeling to the one evoked by this poem?

Try it! Observe an animal that you see often (in the woods, by a body of water, or even in your backyard). Think of similes or metaphors to describe its features or behaviors. Choose a tone for your poem. It might be a quiet observation, a silly personification, or an otherwise interesting perspective. You may have a structure in mind that fits your ideas. If not, just start writing. In the case of “Solitude,” the lines started looking like a curve, so I went with it. Sometimes, the poem decides.

3. Life on the River

Several of the poems originated from day-to-day life on the river itself: what it feels like to be disoriented in the shifting bogs of the headwaters (“Lesson from the Bogs”), be lowered into a cold, damp lock enclosure (“Locking Through”), paddle beside a massive barge tow (“Barge Race”), appreciate the changing landscape of design created by erosion and sediments (“River Sculptor”), watch a rainstorm from under a picnic shelter (“Summer Storm”), and witness the setting sun from a campsite on a sand island (“Sand Island Sunset”). The poem, “Mississippi Melting Pot,” references contributions of the river’s immense watershed, leaving an implied parallel to the melting pot of our nation.

- Which poem made you think of an experience you’ve had? How was your experience the same? How was it different?
- Which of the poems help you feel as if you were there yourself? What drew you in?
- Which of these experiences would you like to have? Which would you like to avoid?

Try it! Think of a time you were intrigued or overwhelmed by a breathtaking experience. Think of how it looked, felt, sounded, smelled, even tasted. Write a poem about that experience, using imagery to pull your reader into the scene.

4. River Folk

Some of the poems in this collection tell the stories of historical and present-day riverside residents, as well as those whose love for the river draws them back again and again.

“Banjo Man” introduces the reader to folk singer, Mike Turner, through a poem using lyrics from a song he wrote about the Mississippi. In the poem, “*Brush Creek Belle*,” the reader meets two inventive brothers who piece together their own craft for an epic adventure. “Pearl Buttons” and “Kentucky Lake Legacy” give historical accounts in free verse poetry. (You can read the backstories of John Boepple and the Danville Grain Elevator in the Blog section of www.barbgeiger.com.) “Resilience” conveys admiration for residents along the river, who understand and respect its power and changing moods. On a lighter note, “River Addresses” and “Moonshine Jell-O Shots” convey the hospitality and fun-loving nature of the folks we met as we made our way down the river.

- Which of the poems gave you a strong sense of place? How did the words convey this?
- From what you learned through the poems, which of these river folks would you most like to meet? Why?

Try it! Think of a person or a group of people with an interesting story. What’s the idea you would most like to express? This will probably set the tone of your work. Decide where you’ll begin and what the most important parts of the story are that you want to tell. Then get started!

5. Humor

A healthy sense of humor can make ‘most everything more tolerable, even five months of “roughing it” with your spouse in a kayak. The lighter side of our expectations versus reality is reflected in “Everyday Oatmeal” and “River Rat.” Dozens of empty chairs and swings in yards overlooking the river led to “Riverside Seat,” envisioning the procrastination that would certainly ensue if I had a meditational spot like that of my own. “Craft Envy” was born from frequent comparisons with larger and more luxurious sailboats, cruisers and yachts and from our tendency to peruse “for sale” boards at marinas along the way. Even embarrassing mishaps can be a source of humorous visual imagery after the fact, as in the rhyming poem, “Stuck on a Stump.”

- Which of the poems tickled your funny bone? Share what it was about one particular poem that made you laugh.
- Choose one of the poems that ends with a twist you didn’t expect. Share how you thought the poem might end and what effect the twist had on your perspective.

Try it! Think of a moment that makes you chuckle, or a story that elicits laughs from your friends. Follow that thought and see where it takes you. Does it show up in rhyming verse? Can you exaggerate to add sensory imagery, or follow it to an absurd conclusion? Can you put an unexpected twist at the end? When you read it to a friend, what reaction do you get? Is it what you wanted to achieve?

6. The End

The last two poems, “Paddle Partner” and “Journey’s End,” reflect the satisfaction of completing our goal together. While not even close to perfect, our experience was shared between the two of us, with the many friends we met along the way, and with you, through this poetic journey from source to sea.

- Which part of your virtual river trip did you find most interesting?
- Which poem (or poems) particularly touched you? How?

Thank you for joining us for this adventure through the poems in *Mississippi Meanderings*. If you’re a member of a book club, class, or other group and you’d like me to meet with your group virtually or in person (in the Southeast Wisconsin area), please feel free to email me at bgeiger1@gmail.com. I can also give presentations about our kayak service trip or about either of my books to groups that might be interested in finding out more. Lastly, if you have comments, questions, or even your own poems from the prompts that you’d like to share with me, I’d love to hear from you!

Wishing you adventures of your making with those you hold dear,
Barb