

A READING GUIDE TO *VISIBLE WORLDS* BY MARILYN BOWERING

Fiction at its best is a challenge to the heart and mind. It moves us to reconsider our lives and their meaning, and it stretches the boundaries of the world within which we live. Marilyn Bowering explores the limits of understanding and of the imagination—and she loves to tell a good story. “In *Visible Worlds*,” she says, “I was trying to grasp the interplay between the personal and the cultural as I feel it myself. It was done through the fingertips, so to speak. I was asking, ‘What is really going on behind the events of our lives and why do I feel about them the way I do?’”

This reading guide is designed for individual readers or reading groups to explore some of the questions raised by *Visible Worlds* and to examine and enjoy the widespread roots of the story. It includes a conversation with the author, suggested discussion topics and a recommended reading list.

AN INTRODUCTION TO MARILYN BOWERING

Visible Worlds is the second novel by Marilyn Bowering. It follows her critically acclaimed novel, *To All Appearances A Lady*, which took the reader into the history of the Chinese and British presence on the west coast of Canada. Both books have been published in English throughout the world; *Visible Worlds* is available as well in numerous other languages. Marilyn Bowering has won many awards for her poetry, and has written drama for radio and stage. She was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, and moved with her family to Vancouver Island in the mid-1950s. During her adult life, she has travelled widely and lived in a number of European countries. She now lives with her family near Sooke, British Columbia.

ABOUT VISIBLE WORLDS

Visible Worlds spans several wars and three continents. It is an epic tale of passion, tragedy and the unpredictable twists of fate that shape human lives. Two brothers, Gerhard and Albrecht Storr, grow up and part from one another in Winnipeg in the 1930s. Each gravitating toward one parent, they choose very different futures, as their mother and father struggle to come to terms with rapid political and social change. The father is drawn to the magic of “Personal Magnetism,” while the German immigrant mother grows ever more obsessed with the ghosts of the past. When Gerhard is sent to the Fatherland to study music, he instead becomes an elite soldier in Nazi Germany and vanishes from sight. Albrecht moves toward an equally uncertain future, grappling with dark family secrets and the emotional turmoil that envelops his life. At the centre of the story is Nathaniel Bone, the brothers’ childhood friend who, driven by his own history and terrible guilt over the death of his sister, tries to even out the scales of life.

This story is entwined with the tale of the Soviet heroine Fika as she attempts to cross the polar ice-cap in 1960. How these two gripping tales, on their separate sides of the globe, unfold and come together is the beauty and accomplishment of this magical and magnetic story.

SOME COMMENTARY ON VISIBLE WORLDS

“With *Visible Worlds*, [Bowering’s] fiction moves into the political context of the world in the thirties and in the sixties. It also, literally, with meteors and magnetism, takes in the cosmos. The result is a swarming, marvellous book, embracing three households in Winnipeg in the thirties, a circus, a psychic, a flood, babies exchanged at birth, twins who are unlike, spirits who speak and a young woman who skis alone, endlessly across the magnetic North Pole.”

—Margaret Dymont, *Boulevard Magazine*

“The reader reaches the end with the sense of having undertaken a long, complex, enthralling journey in the company of a throng of tragic, ordinary, brave human beings whom he has grown to love. It is astounding that Bowering has been able to chronicle so much in what is a relatively short book.”

—Alberto Manguel, *The Globe and Mail*

“In *Visible Worlds*, Marilyn Bowering stretches a net of precise and capacious language across decades, continents, history, and landscapes, then gradually tightens it until her quarry stands revealed: the conjunctions of will and chance of which human fates are made. And always hovering are the magnetic lines of the heart—which burst forth sometimes in speech or deed, sometimes in celestial displays, always in the abiding mystery of connection.”

—Jane Hirshfield is the American author of four collections of poetry including *Lives of the Heart* and a collection of essays, *Nine Gates*. She has won a number of awards including the Poetry Centre Book Award.

“It seems to me to be quite unlike anything I have ever read, and a fantastic antidote to the minimalism or fine-writing-without-event that can make some recent fiction so arid.... A kind of alchemical intelligence illuminates the normally invisible filaments of friendship, love and truth—and their shadows of sibling rivalry, infidelity and secrets—as they thread through this indissolubly linked cast of close neighbours from the Canadian prairies in the mid-thirties backwards and forwards in time and place—even space—from pre-war Central Europe to the Arctic in the Cold War.... Impossible to sum up...because it is specific and exact in its intimate poetic detail inside the architecture of its big myth.”

—Liz Lochhead is a leading Scottish poet and playwright (and also works in TV and film). Her works include *Dracula*, *Mary Queen of Scots Got Her Head Chopped Off*, and *Dreaming Frankenstein* and *Collected Poems*.

AN INTERVIEW WITH MARILYN BOWERING

Q. You’ve said that people are always asking you where your stories come from. *Visible Worlds* is such a “big” story, covering so much time and distance. Where does it come from?

It comes from me, from the kind of life I’ve lived, and from my storytelling family. My paternal grandparents were Newfoundlanders who had moved west—we lived with them when I was small. One of my greatest pleasures was listening to them and to my father and many uncles talk. Some of the stories I heard were based on their neighbourhood in North Winnipeg in the 1930s. These stories were told with a wry and humourous eye on the politics and social life of the time. Everybody was an immigrant of some kind—the children spoke bits of Ukrainian, German, Russian, Italian. There was a wildness and freedom in that life that I envied. One of my uncles had a reputation as a mimic: he would set up his own soap-box kitty-corner from the local communist or anarchist speaker and draw a bigger crowd. They were relatively poor, independent, culturally rich and possessed a kind of “spirituality”—not just in a religious sense, although that was important—but to do with an adherence to specific values of gentility, decency, stamina and hope. My grandmother certainly believed in miracles.

The sense of drama in *Visible Worlds* comes from what was regarded as normal life: the frequent deaths of children through accident or epidemic (three of my father's brothers died very young), the tragedies of the world wars and the Depression. My father, as the eldest boy in the family, had to quit school and work to support the others—he went north, cutting wood in winter; in late summer he went harvesting on the farms. Some of this atmosphere permeates *Visible Worlds*. One of my uncles—with the help of all the others—went to university. Letters from this uncle, a civil engineer working with the United Nations, gave me much of the Korean section of the novel. Perhaps, given as we are to celebrating our current “global culture,” we tend to forget how immediate the impact of world events was on families earlier in the century. People who left for work or to join the army didn't fly home or even telephone on weekends.

The sense of stress on the family, family breakup and heartbreak, came from my mother's stories of her family. Her father was a “Bernardo's Boy,” sent over from England as part of a child immigration scheme when he was eleven. He ran away and joined the Canadian army at the outbreak of World War I as a way to get back to his family in England. The reality and pain of exile, the driving need for a family, a safe haven, came from this. It was from my mother as well that I heard tales of what happens when things go wrong; a mother dies, leaving young children; there is a new marriage, that family has to reconfigure. I think *Visible Worlds* is partly an echo of these times and feelings, very much reshaped by my particular cast of mind.

Q. Would you call the novel autobiographical then?

No, not at all, except as it has these personal sources. Something very different happens to these “roots” in the writing. For instance, the “seed” of this book was my mulling over the question of why Indian Jack Jacobs, the great 1950s quarterback of the Winnipeg Blue Bombers football team, had exerted so much fascination. His was a name to conjure with, at least among the adults I knew—and they were all interested in football. My father, and others who had seen Jacobs play, spoke of him with awe: he clearly exerted a kind of charisma—a “magnetism”—that left a strong impression. I went to Winnipeg to talk to people who had known Jack Jacobs just to see if I could find out what this magical quality was. No one could tell me exactly, but I began to imagine a character—Nathaniel Bone—who had the type of personality that could change the course of life for those around him.

Q. Who did you talk to? Is research always so important?

I talked to sportswriters and former teammates, friends and relatives of Jack Jacobs. Dr. Ben Schomperlain, the team doctor in Jack Jacobs' day, lent me a pair of boots that had belonged to Jacobs—they were beautiful handmade maroon and gold cowboy boots—and I kept them in my study while I was writing.

Research is certainly important. When I am pulling together threads that are both personal (to my characters) and publicly known events, I try to make sure I get the details right. Then there is an authenticity that grounds the story—I can allow my characters to say and do things that “normally” they would keep hidden. Take Friedl, the mother. She is an intelligent, energetic, dissatisfied woman who has great ambitions for one of her sons. Her “dissatisfaction” involves her in the fringes of the Nazi movement and also in a hopeless attraction to Nathaniel Bone. In reality, that “type” of woman would tend to keep those frustrations hidden: she is bound by many social constraints. But because she is living at that time, in those circumstances, and with the background I've given her, what might have stayed out of sight is brought to full view. The research allows me to show why my characters behave as they do. We see not only that Mary's work involves biological warfare experimentation, but why, and the price she must pay for this in her personal life in terms of having children. All these

things—personal, private, cultural, world-wide—intersect. And since that is, I believe, what is “really” going on—I think our lives are impacted by so many things outside ourselves—the story, although imaginative, is meant to be real.

Q. Are you saying, then, that some of the more fantastic elements in *Visible Worlds* are based in reality?

Certainly, although I wouldn't suggest that all of them would necessarily come together in the way they do in a novel. I can't think of anything in *Visible Worlds* that isn't “real” or a variation on something that is real.

Q. What about Personal Magnetism, or the use of magic in WWII counterintelligence, building a giant aircraft carrier out of ice, or even Fika crossing from Siberia on skis?

Each of those is “real” yet embodies a kind of compelling strangeness. Perhaps it is because they also function as metaphors: they share in the real, mystical and paranormal at the same time. Personal Magnetism is a coherent system of beliefs as well as, more recently, a technique with medical applications. There were special units involved in “magic” during the war, and a number of “camps” in Canada where this work was carried out. There was also, certainly, a project for building an aircraft carrier out of ice. The code name was “Habakkuk” and the material—a mixture of ice and sawdust—was called “pykrete” after its inventor. Stories of polar ice-cap crossings, too, once you begin looking for them, are not uncommon. Since the first publication of *Visible Worlds*, I've been told of similar crossings: one was by two brothers, now dead, who lived in Gimli, Manitoba. My initial interest in such a journey came from a hermit I met in the Broken Islands off Vancouver Island in the early 1970s. Joe's journey had been overland from Siberia. Just knowing what he had done opened my mind to a new way of looking at the organization and geography of the world. It made me consider a new set of ways that people and events connect. I suppose that I am writing, at least partly, out of an oral culture, a folk history that is rather different than the one that appears in texts.

Q. The characters in *Visible Worlds* are engaged in battles of various kinds. Some of them are elemental—such as Fika's struggle against the cold and her own physical limitations during her ice-cap crossing—but there are other kinds of battles going on. Could you talk about some of them?

Fika's journey for her life and freedom is certainly a battle. If she fails, she will die. I don't know that I would call the other conflicts “battles.” Wilhelm and Friedl vie, in their marriage, for place in the world of the family. Part of Friedl's struggle, often mistaken in its aims, comes out of desperation: she needs to be of use, to find fulfilment as a person. Her next-door neighbour, the clairvoyant Mme Pince-Jones, has found her place: she, at least, runs her own business! Mildred Lark, too, is a woman in charge of her own destiny: this lion tamer “tames”—as much as he can be tamed—Bill Bone. Political conflict appears to be behind some of the troubles of Friedl and Wilhelm, but I think much of it is her wanting to be “different” than him, to retain something of her own life, her own history and culture. Her great need makes her unlikeable. Wilhelm doesn't understand this. His experience in the trenches has taught him to hate authority, history and received culture as much as Friedl depends on them to define and order the world. Gerhard and Albrecht are twins, rivals for the affection of their parents. Albrecht has lost this fight almost from the beginning: his apparent inferiority, though, impels him to struggle for what he can make of his life. He has an intense desire for a “normal” marriage and a family; he is one of the few characters who is able to understand love. That this desire is thwarted is not his fault; what he wants and needs is taken away from him by the “times” in

which he lives. Mary, his wife, is damaged by the realities of warfare and by the loss of her child. Everyone is lessened by warfare in one way or another. These characters experience ongoing conflicts: Who do I believe? How do I make decisions that are based on half-knowledge? How can I understand what and who is good and bad? All these questions involve the pain of making moral decisions, of taking a stand.

A. In much of your other writing, place has been central. Is this also true of *Visible Worlds*?

I think that things happen the way they do—in life as in fiction—because of where they happen, although in *Visible Worlds* the constancy is provided not so much by place as by people. These three families, neighbours at a certain time in Winnipeg, go off in various directions, but keep meeting up. It is as if the commonality of place that they began with keeps reeling them in. *Visible Worlds* is very much a Northern book, too: the perspective from which it is written belongs to the North. “Spirituality” is manifest not only in relations with other, with family, but with the natural world and animals. The city is still very much connected to the country, the country to the wilderness, the wilderness—particularly the untouched North—is the direct line to the stars, the universe and whatever may lie beyond. An awareness that this is where they stand is important to the characters.

A. Many tragedies occur in *Visible Worlds* and at its heart, as you have said, are the destructive wars of the twentieth century. Somehow, though, it isn’t a sad book. How can this be?

The characters in *Visible Worlds* show—as do most real people living real lives—tremendous courage in making what they can out of what they are given. Love, family, children, remain central without these concerns cutting off awareness of what is taking place around them. These are not people who hibernate or “cocoon”: they try and fail and try again, believing always that understanding is possible (if not always easy), that knowledge and tact and humour—their humanity—will somehow see them through.

SUGGESTED TOPICS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Much of *Visible Worlds* has to do with warfare. Do you see the effects of war running through your family, or through the families of people you know?

2. Some of the characters in *Visible Worlds* struggle with what are and are not “moral weapons” in times of war. Is there such a thing as a “moral weapon”? Has anything changed today?

3. Contemporary politics form the background to *Visible Worlds*. Some of the characters make their choice of “life-path” because of political events. Do you think such choices are made for similar reasons today?

4. It could be argued that the various female characters in *Visible Worlds* were early feminists, each in different ways. What were the options open to them? What do you think of their choices?

5. The fate of and treatment of children is important to the story of *Visible Worlds*. It could be said that everything—both in the novel and in life—springs from this. Do you agree? What changes in the treatment of children might effect change in the world?

6. Having meaning in their lives is important to characters as different as Mme Pince-Jones and Gerhard Storr. What do the different characters do to find meaning? Is this the same as spirituality?
7. How much of the conflict in *Visible Worlds* comes about because of differing cultures? Do you see such conflict as inevitable? Canada is a country of immigrants: is this important to the story?
8. The epigraph from Plato at the beginning of *Visible Worlds* indicates that the story may have something to do with the “problems” of morality. What are these problems and how are they solved—if at all—by the characters? Are these problems the same as the ones we face today?
9. The world of “fact” and the world of the “mysterious” often collide in the story. Are these worlds mutually exclusive? Should they be?
10. Fika’s journey across the Arctic ice-cap is heroic. Why is this a woman’s journey? Are there other kinds of heroism in *Visible Worlds*? What other forms can heroism take?

RECOMMENDED READING

The Arctic Bibliography, under the direction of the Arctic Institute of North America, Department of Defence, 1953. Open any page of the five-volume Arctic Bibliography and be immersed in the world of Arctic survey, exploration, science and philosophy. Brief synopses direct the reader to source material in a variety of languages.

The Symposium, Plato. Love in all its degrees is the subject of the speeches given in *The Symposium*. It contains the myth of the origin of the sexes, and Socrates’ account of love of the visible leading to love of “the things not seen,” which are eternally important.

The Boy from Winnipeg, James H. Gray. Toronto: Macmillan, 1970. A vivid account, full of the atmosphere of growing up in Winnipeg between the two world wars.

A History of Russia, Nicholas V. Riasanovsky. New York: Oxford University Press, 1984. Excellent and readable background to the development of Russia through to post-Stalinism.

Children of the Dead End, Patrick MacGill. London: Caliban Books, 1985. Patrick MacGill's autobiography, published in 1914, tells the story of his life, hired out at age ten in Ireland, and then as a tramp labourer in Scotland. One of thousands of such children “lost to civilization,” he discovered his abilities as a writer and used it to tell this extraordinary “hidden” story of children on the margins.

Children of the Flames, Lucette M. Lagnado and Sheila C. Dekel. London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd., 1991. Many victims of Dr. Josef Mengele (Auschwitz’s “Angel of Death”) were twins. This is their story, told in counterpoint to Mengele’s own.

Powers of Darkness, Powers of Light, John Cornwell. London: Viking, 1991. Attempting to understand a dream that appeared to come true, John Cornwell sets out to examine the world of apparitions, prophecies and miracles in search of proof of the divine.