

As she cares for the dying man in the face of community ignorance and prejudice, Penguin begins to change and to feel—not just in the removed academic terms that had previously sheltered her, but in terms of the human emotions we need to survive.

Although *A Keeper of Sheep* clearly deals with some of the most compelling social issues of our day, Carpenter's novel is perhaps most notable for its protagonist, a funny and sensitive young woman finding her own way. At the heart of this complex coming-of-age novel is Penguin's transformation from a self-absorbed young woman whose life is ruled by her intellect into a compassionate human being, capable of deep feelings and unflinching courage. Carpenter wonderfully articulates what it is like to be a part of the post-boom generation, and to try to do what is right in the face of ignorance.

AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Born and raised in New England, William Carpenter earned his B.A. from Dartmouth College and his Ph.D. at the University of Minnesota. After teaching at the University of Chicago for five years, he left in 1972 to help found the College of the Atlantic, a college dedicated to human ecology and the environment. Mr. Carpenter currently lives in Maine and still teaches at the College of the Atlantic.

In 1976 Mr. Carpenter began publishing poetry. His work has been recognized with many literary prizes, including the Samuel French Morse Prize in 1985. That same year he spent living in Italy, through a grant from the NEA. Although Mr. Carpenter's travels have resulted in the draft of a new novel, *A Keeper of Sheep* is his only novel in print to date. His books of poetry include *Hours of Morning*, *Rain*, and *Speaking Fire at Stones*. *A Keeper of Sheep* was actually first published in Bern, Switzerland, as a serial in *Das Bund*.

When *A Keeper of Sheep* was in its conceptual stages, Carpenter realized he needed a credible narrator, someone young and upbeat, both intelligent and innocent, who could serve as a bridge between the world of AIDS and the larger community. "I conceived of Penguin one day in the shower," Carpenter says, "and she took over the narrative from that point. Over the years of writing and rewriting, Penguin was friend and confidante, and looking back, it would be accurate to say she wrote the book." Carpenter's poetic command of language, his concern for the environment, and his interest in social issues are evident throughout *A Keeper of Sheep*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Who, or what, is the keeper of sheep, and what is being "kept"?
- What do Penguin's birthmark and her nickname mean? How does this meaning change

from the beginning to the end of the novel? How do these changes reflect changes in her identity?

- Is Penguin a destructive or a constructive character, in light of all of her actions?
- What does Penguin's discovery of her sexuality represent, in terms of her search for identity? How is her sexuality different with: Rebecca, Bondo, Jerry, and Virgil? Why? Penguin is no longer a "virgin" at the end of the novel, but is she still innocent? Why or why not?
- How is love defined in the novel? Compare and contrast Penguin's and Joshua's love for Arthur. Compare both of those to Dorothy's love for her unborn child.
- Who would you define as Penguin's family? Who do you think she believes is her family?
- Why does Penguin mark herself with Arthur's blood in Chapter 18?
- What does Jerry Perera mean to Penguin in the beginning? In the end? Would you find him fascinating or repulsive?
- The Vietnam War enters the novel briefly, in relation to Jerry. How are Vietnam and AIDS linked?
- Compare and contrast the circumstances, results, and meanings of the burning of the fraternity and of Joshua's house. Does the second incident reveal anything about the first? Are either of the events portrayed sympathetically, and if so, why?

- What part does the various artistic expression, or lack thereof, of Arthur, Dorothy, Richard, Penguin, and Joshua play in the novel? Why is it unimportant to both Richard and Arnold to see their work on display?
- Is there a class struggle in the novel? To which “class” does Penguin belong?
- What role do Rita and Pura play in Penguin’s life, and specifically, to the events of this summer?
- Death is a strong theme throughout the novel—in the form of AIDS, divorce, fire, and insecticide. Is there life at the end of the story?
- Where is Penguin going at the end of the novel, and why? Why does she look at the fraternity before she goes? How do these events change your overall response to the novel?

OTHER WORKS OF POETRY BY WILLIAM CARPENTER:

Hours of Morning. University Press of Virginia Press, 1981.

Rain. Northeastern University Press, 1985.

Speaking Fire at Stones. Tilbury House, 1992.

FOR FURTHER READING:

Feinberg, David B. *Eighty Sixed.* New York: Viking, 1989.

Salinger, J.D. *The Catcher in the Rye.* New York: Bantam Books, 1986.

Sidwa, Bapsi. *An American Brat.* Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1993.

And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987.

Carless, Inge B. and Mary Pittman-Lindeman, eds. *AIDS: Principles, Practices and Politics.* Hemisphere Publications Corporation, 1988.

Levine, Carol and Joyce Bermel, eds. *AIDS: The Emerging Ethical Dilemmas.* Hudson: Hastings Center, 1985.

A KEEPER OF SHEEP by William Carpenter

Trade Paper, \$13.95
ISBN: 1-57131-007-X

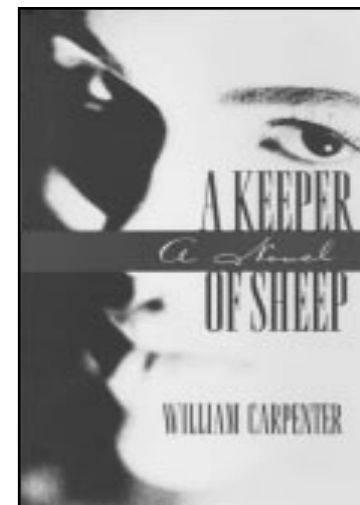
Hardcover, \$21.95
ISBN: 1-57131-000-2

MILKWEED EDITIONS
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A MILKWEED READING GUIDE

A KEEPER OF SHEEP by William Carpenter



“With relentless, crackling dialogue, Carpenter creates a perceptive narrator who is by turns annoying, funny, and wise. . . . Sensuous, highly textured prose, which unfolds with grace and sometimes heartbreaking accuracy.”
—*Publisher’s Weekly* (starred review)

ABOUT THE PLOT:

Expelled from Dartmouth College for attempting to set fire to a fraternity house that was the scene of a gang rape, Penelope Solstice, whose nickname is “Penguin,” retreats to her family’s summer home on Cape Cod. There she finds herself caring for Arthur, the AIDS-stricken lover of her next-door neighbor. Arthur is struggling to complete his final work, a composition based on a series of poems called “The Keeper of Sheep.”