



# READER'S GUIDE

## HERE IS WHERE WE DISEMBARK

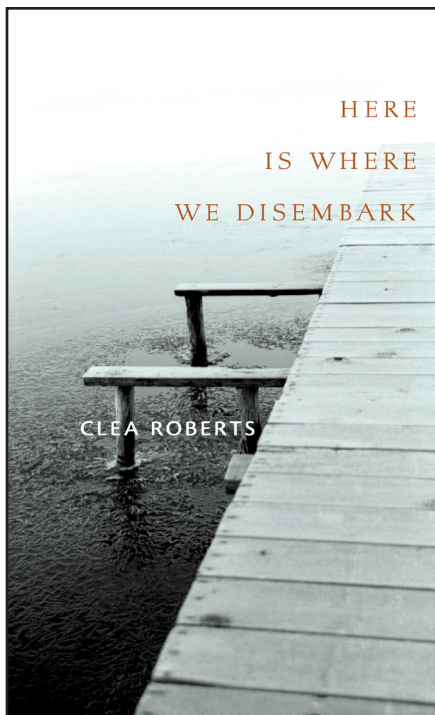
Clea Roberts  
Freehand Books

### HOW TO USE THIS READER'S GUIDE

This guide is intended for readers, book clubs and students who want to deepen their engagement with *Here Is Where We Disembark*.

There are four sections:

- **About the Book**
- **About the Author**
- **A Conversation with Clea Roberts**
- **Resources and Select Titles**



### ABOUT THE BOOK

With her debut collection, poet Clea Roberts presents an insightful & ecological reading of the Canadian North's past & present.

Roberts draws out the moments that comprise a cycle of seasons, paying as much attention to the natural—the winter moon's second-hand light that pools in the tracks of tree squirrels & loose threads of migrating birds—as she does to the manufactured—the peripheral percussion of J-brakes & half-melted ice lanterns.

She also casts her gaze back to the Klondike Gold Rush of 1897-1898, raising the voices of those marked by a frenetic race for fortune: a seductive, edgy wolf, a disillusioned photographer, and a pragmatic prostitute, among others.



Photo by Archbould Photography,

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clea Roberts lives in Whitehorse, Yukon, on the Takhini River with her husband and two children. Her debut collection of poems, *Here Is Where We Disembark*, was nominated for the Gerald Lampert Award for best first book of poetry in Canada, the ReLit Award and the Alberta Readers Choice Award. Roberts has received fellowships from the Vermont Studio Centre, the Atlantic Centre for the Arts, and is a five-time recipient of the Government of Yukon's Advanced Artist Award. Her work has been nominated for a National Magazine Award and her poem "When We Begin to Grow Old" won the After Al Purdy poetry contest. Clea is the founder of the biennial Whitehorse Poetry Festival ([www.whitehorsepoetry.com](http://www.whitehorsepoetry.com)).

## A CONVERSATION WITH CLEA ROBERTS

**Q: Where did you get the idea for the title—*Here Is Where We Disembark*?**

A: The title was taken from the first poem in Part 2 of the book. The poems in this section are about the Klondike Gold Rush. The line that became the book's title is spoken by a voice from the past, and yet that voice seemed to resonate with the present-day poems in Part 1 of the book. For me, the title suggests a transition from the known to the unknown, a shift from the domestic to the wild.

**Q: Why is the natural world featured so strongly in *Here Is Where We Disembark*?**

A: I've always been interested in the bridges between the natural and the human-made worlds. There is a dynamic force in our relationship with nature that intrigues me. Nature simultaneously "contains and expels us," as the poet Christian Wiman said. This shifting intimacy is a rich source for my poetry.

**Q: What compelled you to write the Klondike Gold Rush poems in Part 2 of *Here Is Where We Disembark*?**

A: The Klondike Gold Rush was an amazing event in Canada's history. Gold fever drew tens of thousands of people to Dawson City. The ego, desperation, giddiness, idealism, longing, naiveté, opportunism and greed of the people who climbed the Chilkoot Trail to the gold fields is remarkable and yet, so human.



I read a lot of personal accounts and stories of women who experienced the Klondike Gold Rush, but felt I wanted to know more about them. The poems in Part 2 are written in the persona of various women (some fictional, some not). My intent was to speculate on their private lives and innermost thoughts, using what I knew from my time spent digging through personal letters and photographs in the Yukon Archives as a springboard.

**Q: How does where you live affect your poetry? How does the North impact your work?**

A: Yukon's isolation is very penetrating. Any place beyond the territory's borders is referred to as "Outside," a reference to our tenuous link to the rest of Canada. Being removed from the distractions of big cities is good for my writing practice. As a poet, I need time and space to focus on my internal life—something a small, wilderness city like Whitehorse provides.

In Yukon, winter is around six months of the year, and as a result, it's a major focus of my writing. Winter in northern Canada is so long and deep that it often provokes complex, emotional reactions from people. When I first arrived in Yukon, it felt very much like I was entering an apprenticeship to winter. Most of my poems that deal with winter as a subject are an attempt to orient myself and to find my place in the season. Aesthetically, I think winter is something that shapes my poetry even when I'm not writing about it directly. There is great power and beauty in winter's minimalism—it's a piercing force of nature that seems to create ritual and myth out of everyday things.



**Q: How do you define poetry?**

A: The poet Octavio Paz saw poetry as a life force that travels from one medium to the next. In that sense, poetry is not limited to the medium of the poem. For me, poetry lives in the sense of longing inspired by a tree full of autumn leaves or in the weight of the silence after a first snow. It lives in birds, ordinary human gestures and even a warm pair of winter boots. As a poet, I work to gather up the poetry around me and work it into poems, but the poem is just a temporary vessel for poetry. We might look to the label "poem" when we are trying to find some poetry, but I think poetry is really everywhere.

**Q: When did you start writing poetry?**

A: I wrote my first real poem when I was in high school. And by “real” poem, I mean a poem that taught me something about myself and altered my perception of the world a little. I had a wonderful English teacher who would drive us to the theatres so that we could see plays like *The Girlhood of Shakespeare’s Heroines*. She helped me understand poetry as a natural language and a tool for self-expression.

**Q: What is the right way to read poetry?**

A: It’s difficult to say if there is a right way to read poetry. I encourage people to read poetry without any expectations or pressure to understand it. I think when we try to understand a poem too much, we can smother it with our analysis.

Focus on the images conjured by the poem. Listen to what the poem is saying with its sound and tone. And then try to bring your awareness and your personal experience into the reading of the poem. Poke and prod the poem as if it were your own limb. The meaning will come indirectly, organically.

**Q: What authors do you enjoy reading? Who do you learn from?**

A: Mostly, I look for writing that can teach me about truth and humour, and has an underlying sense of faith in the human condition. I like writing that investigates, hasn’t already made up its mind, and has, as poet and novelist Anne Michael’s said, “an unassailable argument for hope.”

I read a lot of fiction and tend to gravitate toward novels that are written with poetry in mind. Anne Michaels, Michael Ondaatje, Alice Munro, Lisa Moore and Marilynne Robinson are a few writers whose work I return to time and time again.

And as far as poetry goes, Don McKay, Sharon Thesen, Louise Glück and Jack Gilbert are great writers who have taught me a lot about the craft of poetry.

**Q: What are you working on next?**

A: I love to read and I consider reading a really important part of my work. Living a balanced life is also part of my work—doing so fills up my creative reservoir.

I’m also working on a second book of poetry. It’s hard to talk about it right now because I’m still trying to figure out the book myself. Every poem I write is a journey of sorts, and while I might know the general direction I’m headed and have a few key images to guide me, I don’t know where the poem will take me until I’ve arrived.

## RESOURCES & SELECT TITLES

Clea Roberts – *Here Is Where We Disembark* (Freehand Books, 2010)

Christian Wiman – “What is Nature Poetry?” an interview with Orion Magazine available at: [www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/audio-video/item/what\\_is\\_nature\\_poetry](http://www.orionmagazine.org/index.php/audio-video/item/what_is_nature_poetry)

Yukon Archives – [www.tc.gov.yk.ca/archives.html](http://www.tc.gov.yk.ca/archives.html)

Octavio Paz – *The Bow and the Lyre* (University of Texas Press, 2009)

Anne Michaels – An interview with The Guardian available at: [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/02/interview-anne-michaels](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/may/02/interview-anne-michaels)

Anne Michaels – *Skin Divers* (McClelland & Stewart, 2007), *Fugitive Pieces* (McClelland & Stewart, 1996) and *The Winter Vault* (McClelland & Stewart, 2009)

Michael Ondaatje – *In the Skin of a Lion* (McClelland & Stewart, 1987), *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* (Anansi, 1970)

Alice Munro – *Open Secrets* (Penguin, 1994), and *The Love of a Good Woman* (McClelland & Stewart, 1998)

Lisa Moore – *February* (Anansi, 2009)

Marilynne Robinson – *Housekeeping* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), *Gilead* (HarperCollins, 2006), *Home* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008)

Don McKay – *Birding, Or Desire* (McClelland & Stewart, 1983), *Camber* (McClelland & Stewart, 2004)

Sharon Thesen – *The Good Bacteria* (Anansi, 2006), *News & Smoke* (Talonbooks, 1999)

Louise Glück – *Wild Iris* (Ecco Press, 1992) and *Averno* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996)

Jack Gilbert – *The Great Fires* (Knopf, 2010)

