

WRITING THE
CLIMATE

**MAMA
AMAZONICA**
by Pascale
Petit

CLIMATE
READING GROUP

'The poems take you to a place where language feeds on language... no one writing in English today comes anywhere near the exuberance of Pascale Petit. Rarely has the personal and environmental lament found such imaginative fusion, such outlandish and shocking expression that is at once spectacularly vigorous, intimate and heartbroken.'

Daljit Nagra

Mama Amazonica (Bloodaxe 2017) is Pascale Petit's seventh poetry collection. It was a Poetry Book Society Choice and won the Royal Society of Literature Ondaatje Prize (2018) and the inaugural Laurel Prize (2020). It develops her self-declared 'obsession' with the Amazon in poems that tell the painful story of her mother, suffering at the hands of Petit's rapacious father and from the consequences of overzealous psychiatric treatment. Transformed into the exotic plants and creatures of the Amazon struggling for survival against human depredations, the spirit of Petit's mother is celebrated and honoured.

The poems are propelled by metaphor and symbol to create shamanic-style allegories of beauty against the odds, the redemptive possibility of bearing witness and finding words for unspeakable truths. Before becoming a poet, Petit worked as a sculptor and her work has a distinctive materiality, grounded in the physical, an assemblage of exotic wonders. The effect is rich and compelling, held taut by direct and economical tone and syntax. Moving between the Amazon and the Parc Zoologique in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, these poems explore the mother's history and legacy in a dazzling array of incarnations.

If you don't have time to read the whole book before the session, you might like to look at this selection of poems, some of which we'll be reading together:

Mama Amazonica

Jaguar Girl

Rainforest in the Sleep Room

My Amazonian Birth

My Mother's Dressing Gown

Madre de Dios

Jaguar Mama

Scarlet Macaws

Rio Tambopata

Kapok

In the Giraffe House

Mama Oceana

King Vultures

The Jaguar

Possible discussion points:

- Travelling with Pascale Petit to the Amazon, what are our first impressions?
- How does the language Petit use evoke the sense of place throughout the collection?
- How do 'the personal and environmental lament' come together in these poems?
- In what ways might we sense Petit's poetic transformations transforming our own awareness of her preoccupations? What has changed for us after reading her book?
- Where is Petit's previous work as a sculptor evident in her poetic strategies?

'In Pascale Petit's evocations, the Amazon rainforest comes alive, with human characters as much a part of nature as the creatures and plants living there – alluring and frightening, violent and vulnerable, dangerous and endangered. A feat of imaginative intensity, this is also an act of reckoning and reparation, in which deep empathy for a disturbed mother is transmuted into the exacting beauty of poetic language.'

Eva Hoffman

If you enjoyed *Mama Amazonica* and would like to read some of the poets Pascale Petit has named as influences, seek out the work of Les Murray, Tomas Tranströmer, Alice Oswald, Natalie Diaz. There is also more to read from Pascale herself here:

pascalepetit.co.uk/poetry-collections/mama-amazonica
pascalepetit.blogspot.com