**Reader’s Guide Discussion Questions**

*The Short List of Certainties*

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1. *The Short List of Certainties* opens with the prologue poem, “Snow Blind,” in which the speaker is watching a glacier calve and then experiences a temporary loss of vision.

Define “blindness” in terms of fear. In terms of faith. How are they similar? Dissimilar? Give examples of each drawn from your own life.

How would you explain the phrase “the blind what-if?”

1. There are two epigraphs attributed to St. Augustine of Hippo and Pascal which introduce the book:

*Hope has two beautiful daughters. Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are*.

–St. Augustine of Hippo

*You must wager. It is not optional. You are embarked*.

—--Pascal

a) According to St. Augustine, one of Hope’s beautiful daughters is Anger. Throughout history and in individual lives, “righteous anger” has been used as a justification for change and, in some cases, physical violence. Find an example from current events. What are the tangible effects of this anger? In your opinion, is the use of this anger justified?

b) Do you agree or disagree that there may be other forms of violence which are not physical? Explain.

c) Within the book the twin daughters of Hope--Anger and Courage-- struggle within themselves, argue with each other, and rage at the world as they fight against work-a-day violence, social injustices, and even Hope itself. How are the emotions of anger and courage a product of hope? How and why are they at odds with each other?

d) What are three ways in which the structure of the book is shaped by the feelings or interactions of the twin daughters?

e) Define the “wager” to which Pascal refers in the epigraph. What does it mean to be “embarked”? What does it mean that the gamble or bet is “not optional”?

3) In what ways does the structure of this bookfollow the idea of the hero’s journey as being one of adventure and transformation? In what ways does the book depart from this notion?

1. Time, memory and “the journey” all are key elements in this book. For example, the first lines of the poem, “Nearby Is the Country,” state: “The past moves inside me/as water from a swollen river makes its inevitable way/to the sea.” How are time and memory like moving water? Who do you believe could be the “bloody blind one” standing on the rooftop waiting to be recused? Who or what do you think could be the rescuer?
2. The poem “Dematerializing” draw heavily on the tale of “The Ring of Gyges,” as set forth in Plato’s *Republic,* which explores the idea of human virtue. What would you do if you knew there would be no consequences to your actions? Does your answer match your core beliefs about who you want to be?

7) The poems “A Banjo Strums Itself to Sleep” and “The ~~Mirage of~~ Saints Confess Their ~~Unholy~~ Thoughts” employ the editorial strike-out function (as in ~~strike-out~~) as a way of creating juxtaposition among images to produce a poem that can be read and experienced at different levels. Choose one of the poems and analyze the different meanings found when reading it with and without the struck-out text. Which way feels more authentic to you and why? Do you believe this technique causes the poem to be more effective or less effective?

1. The signature poem “Two Daughters” ends with the lines: “burn a path through this world/or move on to the next.” In what ways can a person “burn a path” through the world?
2. In section three, many of the speakers are presented as imperfect human beings. In what ways do these personas serve the themes of this book?
3. What might your friends and family say are on your own “short list of certainties?” Explain why they would or would not be correct in their assumptions? Is there something you might add to your list that others might not know about?