

Study guide for *Remaking Achilles* by Carol Tyx

Starting on page 91, there are helpful notes about the poems in each section.

Big questions

1. Most of the poems in Tyx's collection are about events that occurred in 1951. Beyond an understanding of history, what do the poems offer us? How do the events that Tyx portrays relate to our world? To you?
2. What do the poems teach us about the power of writing? About heroism? About working for justice and creating positive change?
3. In Greek mythology, Achilles is a mighty warrior, the hero of the Trojan War. Do a bit of research about him and consider why Tyx included him in her book title and many of her poem titles.
4. What does Tyx's collection teach you about how **research and imagination can fuel each other**?

Introduction

5. What does Tyx's introduction suggest about why she wrote her book? What inspired her? What do you expect her poems to be like?
6. How does Tyx's first poem, "Long and Winding Road," impact you? What does it lead you to expect in the rest of the book? Notice how Tyx creates momentum in this poem. Notice how her **sentences** work with her **line breaks** and **stanza breaks**. Notice when she uses **end-stopped lines** and when she uses **enjambment**. Notice the big **turn** (shift, change) in topic and tone at the end of the second stanza. Notice other subtler turns.

The Leased of These

1844-1901 This section, along with the next, offer a history of the abusive conditions at the prison.

7. Theophil Chevalier is the first person that Tyx introduces us to in her poems. Why does she call him "the first heel slasher" even though he was at Angola a century before the famous Heel-String incident? How does this poem impact you? How does it make you feel? What does it make you think about? Notice Tyx's use of vivid (and disturbing) **sensory detail**.
8. Although "The Leased of These" is a somber poem, it features **wordplay** (leased/least). How does this wordplay/punning contribute to the poem's meaning?
9. "Leasee" is the first of the collection's many persona poems. A **persona poem** is a poem that is in the voice of someone other than the poet. Much like a novelist pretends to be a character, the poet assumes the voice of someone else (in this case, a historical figure, S.L James). Many persona poems are highly **ironic**: there is a great deal of distance or contrast between how the

speaker feels about themselves and how the poet feels about them. How does Tyx signal her disapproval of S.L. James in “Leasee”? Why would a poet choose to write in the voice of someone who is repugnant? What does the choice enable the poet to accomplish?

10. Throughout the book, Tyx italicizes words that she found in the historical record. As you read the rest of the collection, consider how these historical words interact with the words Tyx herself created. In “Leasee,” for instance, how is your interpretation of S.L. James (and Tyx’s poem) shaped by your knowledge that she is quoting the actual words of the person who honored James at his funeral?

11. What do you expect when you encounter a piece of writing titled “How to...”? How does the final poem in this section (on page 21) use reader knowledge of “how-to” writings to attack Angola, a plantation prison? What does the poem imply about the causes of the horrible abuse that occurred at Angola? (Notice the **epigraph**, “after Frank X. Walker.” It means that the poem is inspired by the poetry of Walker.)

The Long Line 1901-1951

12. The first three poems in this section are persona poems, introducing the voices of three more people. What do the three people behind the voices have in common? How do they differ? (The man in “Before I Was Achilles” is a recurring character. What do you imagine might happen to him?)

13. A **found poem** is a piece of writing that was not intended to be a poem but is made into one by its “finder,” who usually adds line breaks. On p 28, Tyx includes the first of five found poems. How do the found poems contribute to her collection’s impact and meaning? How do they compare to her other poems? To each other? Why would a poet create found poems?

14. After the found poem are three more persona poems, two in the voices of inmates and one in the voice of Maggie Dixon, a frequently recurring voice in the collection. What do we learn about her “Levee Life”? Although “Levee Life” and “Leasee” are both persona poems, notice that in “Leasee,” Tyx distances us from her persona while in “Levee Life,” she draws us close. How do poets (and other writers) draw their readers close to their subjects? Create a sense of **intimacy**?

15. The poems on pages 32-35 and on page 38 depict prison guards and captains. What do we learn about them?

16. The poem on page 37 is quite unusual. It’s in the voice of a spoon! How does this unusual poem impact you? Why would a poet write **an object poem**, a poem in the voice of an object? For another example of an object poem, read Sylvia Plath’s [“The Mirror,”](#) She wrote this well-known poem two years before she committed suicide.

Remaking Achilles

February 1951

17. This section opens with the title poem, “Remaking Achilles.” How and why is Tyx **alluding** to the Achilles of Greek mythology? What does this poem teach us about the Heel-Slashers and their motives?

18. What connections do you see between “Remaking Achilles” and the next poem “Lineage,” about a Flemish scientist?

19. “First Responder” is the first poem in the voice of the prison’s nurse, Mary Margaret Daughtry, another frequently recurring voice in the collection. What is she like? How does she compare to some of the other voices you’ve encountered? What role do you imagine she will play after the Heel-String incident?

20. How does the poem in Heel-Slasher Wallace MacDonald’s voice (45) compare to “Remaking Achilles” (40)? How does MacDonald see himself? How does the poem shape your attitude toward him and the Heel-String incident?

21. “Stunt Man” is the first poem in the Governor’s voice. What is he like? What is the significance of the poem’s title?

22. We first heard the voice of the man in “Before I Was Achilles II” in “Before I Was Achilles I” (25). How has this man changed? How does he see himself and his situation in the second poem?

23. What story do the rest of the poems in this section tell?

Inside the Big House: The Citizen Committee Investigation

February to April 1951

24. The poem on page 59 is both a found poem and a persona poem in the voice of Clifford Leake, whom Tyx describes as “one of the most brutal guards” (93). What do his own words reveal about him? How do they compare to testimonies in other poems?

25. What transformations occur in the poems on pages 60 and 61?

26. The poem on page 62, like the one on page 59, is both a found poem and a persona poem. “Found Poem 4” is in Nurse Daughtry’s voice. What does it reveal about her and her values? Her decision to make a statement?

27. What does Maggie Dixon decide in the next poem?

28. The poems on pages 64 and 65 are voiced by men who are criticizing women. What does their criticism reveal about the men themselves?

29. On page 66, Tyx gives us the third appearance of the man who appeared in earlier “Achilles” poems (25 and 49). How does he continue to change?

30. The poem on page 69 is a persona poem spoken by a man who is dead, Clifford LaCoste. What does this poem and others in the collection reveal about how the truth is distorted?

31. “Easter Uprising” is one of three poems in an African American voice. The others occur on pages 26 and 81. What do you think Hamilton Israel means when he says, “we done astonished ourselves” (71)?

32. On pages 73-75, Tyx sandwiches a poem in a reporter’s voice between two poems spoken by government officials (the sheriff and governor). What is the impact of that **juxtapositioning**?

Aftermath: Ain’t Over Yet

Beyond April 1951

33. What are the key events in the aftermath? What, as the speaker says in “Hole Truth,” “ain’t over yet” (81)? Study the final stanza of the poem. How does Tyx use **sound** and **metaphor**?

34. What more do we learn about Maggie Dixon and her impact?

35. “Red Hat Redux” refers back to the poem on page 69 about Clifford LaCoste. How does the speaker in this poem feel about him? About himself and his painting?

36. The collection’s final poem, “Point Lookout: Becoming Achilles,” is spoken from beyond the grave (like the Clifford LaCoste poem on page 69). This final poem is also in the voice of the man who speaks the three poems titled “Before I Was Achilles” (25, 49, 66). What does “becoming Achilles” seem to mean to him? What does it mean to you? How does this final poem work as the book’s conclusion? What does it leave you thinking and feeling?