

A Discussion Guide for Readers of  
Alexis Orgera's *Head Case: My Father, Alzheimer's & Other Brainstorms*  
July 2021

## QUILTING

One of my favorite artworks is Aminah Robinson's "[Church Quilters on Water Street](#)." I love this painting (with some mixed media like sewn buttons) because it depicts a church quilting bee with all the juxtaposed color and texture of an actual quilt. It's a feast for the eyes, and I love having students study it when we're thinking about visual culture. While the bright, vibrant, and densely populated image may initially feel disorienting, I find that students love to uncover all bits and pieces of the artwork (like the women's strong, large hands), which then allows them to construct a story. The quilting bee was traditionally a way for women to socialize together. By piecing together lives in quiltlike fashion, Robinson depicts a scene of quilting as social, story-making space.

I also love that Aminah Robinson was an art-school trained artist who employed techniques taught to her by her parents and ancestors—from her dad teaching her hogmawg to her mom teaching needlework and button sewing. The constant mix of techniques and mixed media approaches is what gave Robinson's work depth and soul.

My brain naturally works in a similar way. I've never thought in plot (there's a reason I'm not a novelist) but rather how seemingly disparate parts can be puzzled together to create something whole. But how does a writer contain all that mess without coming up with a Frankenstein's monster who just feels unhappy and alone?

1. Write around a theme. My immediate subject is, yes, Alzheimer's and grief around losing my dad, but the larger theme, the one that lets me muck around in these topics, is *narrative*. What is narrative? What happens when you forget it? What happens when you're seeing things at a slant, askew, through the eyes of pain, grief, memory?
2. Trust your gut. One of the greatest things I learned from the poet Dean Young in a week-long workshop was to trust the pen in my hand, let myself get playful (and playful doesn't speak only to levity but also flexibility), and allow the subconscious to speak. Young probably didn't use those words, but liked the French surrealists, and that's basically what they were up to, using techniques like automatic writing and language games to bring something important to the surface. One game is simple enough: Write a sentence and then play with sound rather than meaning, see what comes.
3. Capture ideas from the airwaves, like a radio tuner. The opening fragment of *Head Case* actually quotes from an NPR story I was listening to on one of my drives to see my dad in the memory care unit. In another scene, Dad and I are in the car listening to Bruce Springsteen on the radio. Another time, we're painting and listening to 60s hits, which jog a memory for Dad of this "pot-smoking days."

Of course, the quilting happens when you're allowing many different modes, fabrics, ideas to bump up against each other. Then you sew them in a particular way, though they could be sewn any number of ways, really. The trick is to get them to add up to a whole *something*.

I incorporated the following bits and bobs into *Head Case*:

- facts and figures about Alzheimer's
- transcripts of stories from Dad's friends
- deathbed setting / setting up of narrative or central theme of the book : what happens when you lose your narrative
- childhood memories / personal histories
- literary (and biblical) references and short analysis related to themes
- photo descriptions using "different angles" approach
- quotes from transcripts between Dr. Alzheimer and his patient, Auguste D.
- word definitions and language play
- repetition (I am here)
- images of Dad's artwork
- close readings of artwork
- collected quotes from Dad
- general ruminations on language
- scientific studies and science lingo
- child speak
- family and personal ghost stories
- quoting from primary source material
- descriptions of what happens during migraine
- recounted dreams and visions
- clips of news stories
- lists
- letters
- songs

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An important framework in quilting this book for me was the experience of Alzheimer's from a witness perspective. It's visceral, very steeped in witnessing bodily functions and bodies in space because it's very disorienting to, for instance, watch your father unzip his pants and urinate all over the kitchen floor. Cognitive dissonance abounds in these moments. I've used this exercise before with students who want to write about tough subjects but don't have a way "in."

3 paragraphs (fragments):

1. Where were you when someone you love died / you lost someone or something. Describe the place with as little or as much detail as you want.
2. What was going on in the world at the time? or What parallel thing was going on at the time?
3. Describe the person or thing you lost.

See what happens when those three fragments butt up against each other. Are you reminded of other things, moments, readings, events? Keep going like this.

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Braiding is a popular technique in lyric essay, and it's really closely related to quilting, sometimes even giving your quilt a sturdier backing. For instance, in the first section of *Head Case*, when I'm setting up the themes, I braid three strands: Dad dying, family history, and literary reference.

Braiding can create structure out of what might seem initially like chaos or monster-making.