

**Dan COMAN**

### **You Must Read This**

*Let's have a cup of coffee first.* That's how one of my favorite books ends and how each morning here at Iowa House Hotel starts.

One of these mornings, walking with my espresso along the river, I witnessed the following scene: a mother and her little son had just crossed the bridge and, at the end of it, on the grass, they found a wild goose, dead. Initially, after watching it without saying a word, they continued on their way. Then, suddenly, the little boy – playing with his football – walked away from his mother, turned back, and slipped the ball under the wing of the dead bird. *Not to feel so lonely*, the boy said, running back to his mother. The woman did not say anything, absolutely nothing. She just looked at the boy. And that bright, intense look was enough for the whole universe to rebuild itself, to make sense again. That morning, the mother's eyes astonished me more than the boy's gesture – not only because she understood and accepted the situation, but also because her look was a very exquisite form of education. The very next moment, I remembered *The Zaica Experiment*.

In the 70-80s, in one of the most terrible periods of Romanian history, in a school near Bucharest, a design teacher gave up all the classical, rigid and silly methods of teaching and, against all the rules, stubbornly, chose to play with his students by asking them questions and, more than that, encouraging them to answer. His classes were not seen in a good way, and he was often warned to stop practising free and creative activities that were in total contradiction to the strict education of the Communist Party of those years.

Professor Zaica created various questions to stimulate children's creativity, trying to get rid of the typical formalisms of adult thinking. His questions were about simple things like joy, smiling, home, etc. The amazing result of this line of questioning was *The Zaica Experiment*, a book that gathers all the children's answers and which, without being a poetry book, is one of the most beautiful and intense poetry books I have ever read.

I am sure that after each answer, the teacher looked at his students exactly how, over 40 years later, here on the bank of the Iowa River, a mother looked at her son after he gave away his favorite toy to a dead bird.

Here are some examples of answers from this book – examples that could also be on a short list of reasons for reading poetry:

*What does the word "modern" mean?* Modern is when you see something beautiful and expensive and you do not have enough money. (7 years old)

*What are eyebrows useful for?* The eyebrows are used to keep the forehead up and not to cover the eyes. (6 years old)

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ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 5, 2018

Khayat (Germany), Hakimi (Israel), Chow (Bohemia), Coman (Romania)

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*What is the soul?* The soul is when your mother puts the cakes on the plate and you leave some of them for the little ones. (8 years old)

*What is sadness?* Sadness means when a man pays a visit to another and drinks a lot. (7 years old)

*What's the smile?* To smile is when some people laugh with their mouth shut, in order not to disturb their neighbours in the block. (7 years old)

*What are tears?* Tears are when the brain has a moment of thought, it gets sweat, and the sweat goes out through the eye. (9 years old)

*What is talent?* Talent is a pride of the brain. (7 years old)

*What is hygiene?* Hygiene is when the relatives pay you a visit and see how clean your house is. (7 years old)

*Why do only some flowers smell beautifully?* Flowers smell beautifully because the bee comes and takes their honey. Only the smell remains. (8 years old)

*What are microbes?* Microbes are some worms that sit in the caries of the teeth, eat, fill up, and then go out, sit on the sidewalk, and when people pass they get into their mouths. (7 years old)

*What is time?* Time is a beautiful horse that spins the earth. (5 years old)

*What is dance?* Dance is people's tic to joy. (7 years old)

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