



### *What is a Self?*

1. What is your name?
2. With whom do you identify?
3. Where were you born?
4. How old are you?
5. Where did you awake this morning?
6. How many years ago did you leave school?
7. Divide your age by three, and find pictures of yourself <sup>if available</sup> from these ages:

8. Is your mind somewhere else from your body right now? Where?

9. In what part(s) of your body do you usually reside?

10. Where are you now?

- ☞ If you are Here, turn to page 220 or 230.
- ☞ If you are There, turn to page 222.
- ☞ If you think these are some of the missing portraits, turn to 60, then 80 and 103.
- ☞ To reapply to be a Subscriber, tear up your Application to be a Subscriber (page 12) & then paste a legible remnant into the box on page 72.



## Gretchen E. Henderson Forms & Deforms the Novel

“There are hundreds of her. Here: she poses in shimmering gold, with burnished curls and closed eyes. In another portrait, her gaze fades behind lavender veils. Ghostlike, she rematerializes black and white in a palm-sized chariot. Her eyes widen under a wreathed brow; her arm points toward clouds. Rising, she flits in Saturn-like rings. She’s close enough to be vibrating, buzzing, close enough I presume to call her by name: Bea.”

— from “Exhibit A”, a part of *Galerie de Difformité* by Gretchen E. Henderson '93

The last thing Gretchen Ernster Henderson '93 wants you to do is read her novel *Galerie de Difformité* from cover to cover. She invites readers, instead, to wander randomly through pages, taking circuitous paths like she did when she walked through New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art while pursuing her MFA at Columbia University.

She recalls the museum as her “favorite classroom” because it taught her as much about creative forms as the books she read. “The experience allowed me to see connections between artworks in ancient Egypt and early nineteenth-century America. I’d wander through another gallery of twentieth-century abstract paintings and be reminded of scientific cellular images. The artworks seemed to converse with each other across time.”

The walking, too, became instrumental for Henderson, as the exercise helped her to manage a neuromuscular disorder that caused her to lose mobility in her upper body when she was 25.

The debilitating illness, one that kept her from tying her shoes or typing, looked as if it might keep her from graduate studies. Thanks to a medical team at UCSF Medical Center, she learned assistive technologies and physical adaptations to manage her condition, to regain much of her physical function and to minimize her pain, basically to reimagine her life. She began seeing deep connections between literature and her own body, from the spine of a book to her own spinal column. She even felt like an antiquarian map. “When you inhabit a body that feels foreign, but which is your own, everything you thought you knew seems unknown: *terra incognita*, as was written on the edges of antiquated maps.”

Her book, *Galerie de Difformité*, years later, was born of both her museum wanderings and her fascination with the formation, or deformation, of words on pages and in bodies of books. She structured her novel as part art catalogue, and part game, so readers can actively involve themselves in navigating and adapting stories. One reviewer, author Lennard Davis, praised Henderson’s novel as “a book you won’t forget” and “a cabinet of curiosities of things deformed, disabled, reformed and enabled. A choose-your-own-adventure that advises and counsels the reader how to change the work itself.”

For example, on nearly every page, Henderson invites her readers to do anything but go on to the next page. At the bottom of page 4, she writes: “To start deforming, turn to page 229. To read another preface, turn to page 14.”

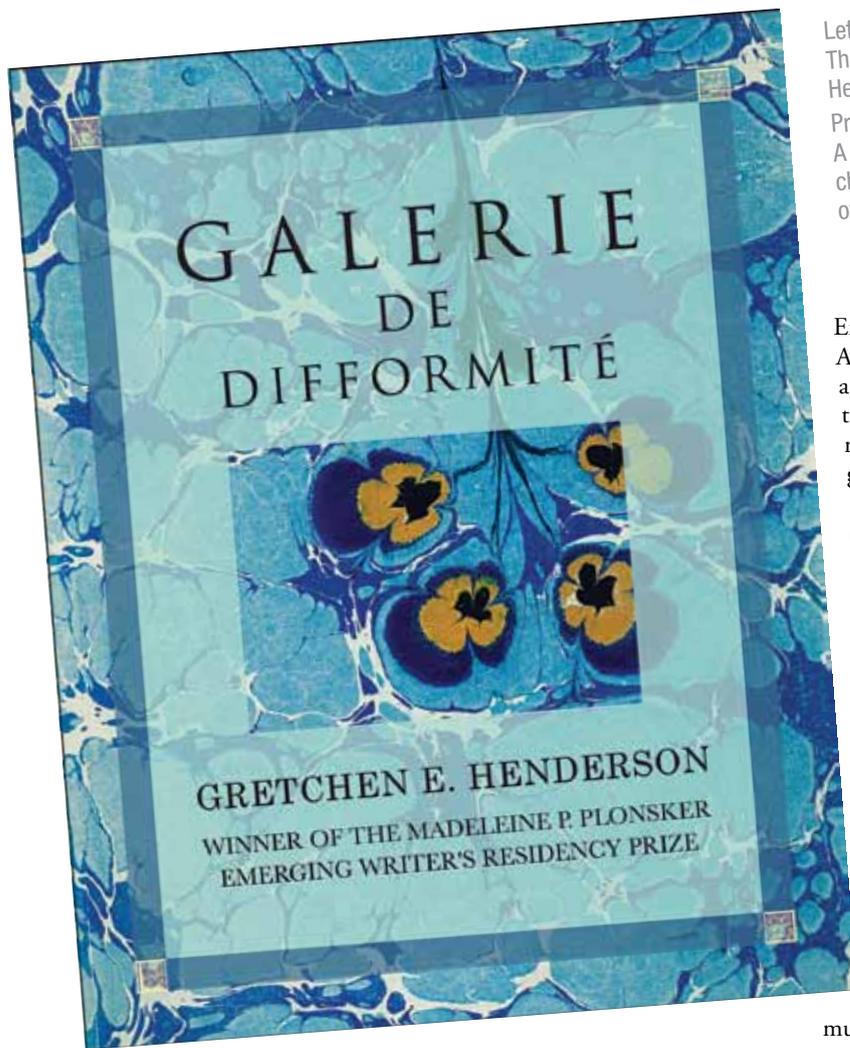
For those who ignore her advice and proceed to page 5, she offers this mild corrective: “If you continued reading from the last page (i.e., didn’t follow directions), please simultaneously rub your head & stomach, then turn to page 16. If you read crookedly (that is, correctly), then turn to page 38 (or alternatively to a number related to your birthday).”

Henderson provides a guide of sorts through her masterful book: Beatrice Portinari, who inspired Dante Alighieri and who served as one of Dante’s guides in his *Divine Comedy*. Henderson’s Beatrice changes over the course of the book: as a reincarnation named Bea, as a quill fashioned from one of her stolen bones, even as a play-on-words in Henderson’s poem “The Beekeeper’s Apprentice (An Invocation; or, Self-Autopsy).”

Henderson even deforms the nature of the book itself. Before the book was published, she mounted an online invitation for people to download pages, to deform and document these adaptations, and send them back to her. These images helped to illustrate the book and also are part of an expanding online gallery. You can find all of the deformed pieces at [difformite.wordpress.com](http://difformite.wordpress.com), and she hopes to showcase more in a series of collaborative chapbooks and a future traveling exhibit. You can even go to YouTube (search for the book’s title) to see a short film on this remarkable text. The published book is part of a larger collaborative project. Henderson hopes an array of participants will participate and bring their own ideas to bear on the *Galerie de Difformité*.

“One subscriber froze the text in ice, while others painted over or erased parts of pages. Some wove deformations, while others transformed excerpts into videos or installations. My own dog chewed it up. Each new submission opens up any fixed idea of deformity, which tends to carry negative connotations. We put the classical *Venus de Milo*, with her severed arms, on a pedestal but often think of deformed bodies as freakish. This is a problem less with the bodies themselves, and more with the limited generosity of our own imaginations.”

The Main Branch of the San Francisco Public Library also will display the book from January to March, thanks to its selection by a national jury for the “BiblioTech” exhibition, sponsored by the College Book Art Association. Henderson’s work also earned for her the 2010 Madeleine P. Plonsker



Left:  
The cover of *Galerie de Diffimité*,  
Henderson's ground-breaking novel.

Previous page:  
A sample spread from her book  
challenges the reader to find their  
own way through the novel.

Emerging Writer's Prize from &NOW Books, and the novel is being distributed by Northwestern University Press.

Aside from reshaping literature through her novel, Henderson also helped reshape SI as part of the school's first coed class. She excelled on stage in several musicals, including *Guys and Dolls*, and received the Ignatian Award, the school's highest honor. She credits drama director Peter Divine '66 and her English teachers John Murphy '59 and Bill Isham for inspiring her love of literature, Chuck Murphy '61 and Tom Murphy '76 for cultivating her admiration of elegant mathematic and scientific designs, and Spanish teacher Susan Ackerman and religious studies teacher Mike Shaughnessy '67 with her passion for social justice. She took part in an El Salvador immersion experience and death penalty vigils, and she volunteered at Shriner's Hospital.

She also trained as a singer and pianist through the San Francisco Conservatory, which influenced how she "thought of, interpreted and heard the world," an influence clearly present in her writing, especially in her poetry and in the innovative and complex structures of her work.

At Princeton, she majored in History and American Studies in hopes of working in Central America for a human rights organization. A summer internship at the San Francisco Family School, started by the Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, started her in a new direction. When she taught writing to the young mothers in the school, she discovered that she was "always in love with stories, even listening to the testimonials of people affected by the civil war in El Salvador. These were stories generously shared. Before these experiences, I never considered the power of the word as peacemaker or as weapon."

A creative nonfiction class at Princeton taught by John McPhee convinced Henderson "that I had stories of my own to share. Before that, I thought of writing as extraneous, as something one did on the side, even as a little selfish."

She also never thought she would become a teacher, but inspired by her Family School experience, she began a three-year stint at Bellarmine College Preparatory in San Jose, where she taught courses in the departments of

English and History, and also piloted an American Studies program, linking American literature and history. She modeled her double-period course on a hypothetical road trip across the United States and even took students to the Sierra foothills to pan for gold, study environmental history and read Mark Twain, and she encouraged them to make connections between geology, economics, architecture, and literature.

During that time, she received a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to study cartographic traditions in world history, and also took a group of students to Europe.

In her spare time, she did vocal coaching for school musicals, helped to moderate the yearbook, and took classes through Stanford's Continuing Studies Program. One short story class, along with a week at the University of Iowa's Summer Writing Festival, led her to see that writing offered a way to connect her wide-ranging interests and background. Her path as a writer led to an MFA from Columbia University and a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri-Columbia. Along the way, she held teaching and research affiliations at a number of colleges, including Barnard College in New York, Knox College and Lake Forest College in Illinois, and Kenyon College in Ohio. She jokes that her life has become an extension of the road trip model for her American Studies course at Bellarmine. Among other fellowships, she has been granted residencies at artists' colonies in Virginia, Vermont, Arkansas, Minnesota and upstate New York. Her journey as a writer has been hand-in-hand with her husband, Ethan Henderson, a former

music management director whom she met in New York. He became an academic librarian now specializing in rare books and archives.

Just as *Galerie de Diffimité* goes in many directions at once, so have Henderson's other writing efforts. She worked on a number of books simultaneously, many of which are just now being published, including *On Marvellous Things Heard*, a nonfiction work that "explores a range of literary appropriations of music in terms of translation and metamorphosis," and *The House Enters the Street*, a novel that she describes as "a musically-structured collection of fiction" and which won recognition from the Association of Writers and Writing Programs. Other works include a chapbook of poetry called *Wreckage: By Land & By Sea* and a number of pieces published in *The Kenyon Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Black Warrior Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *The &NOW Awards: The Best Innovative Writing*, and other journals.

Henderson writes in non-traditional forms because she doesn't believe in fixed forms. "I haven't experienced or witnessed linearity in my life. Instead, I've grown to understand a generous and generative sense of form and deformity. I'm after no goal as I navigate my experiences, often stumbling along, concerning myself more with questions than answers, wanting to be open to perceive and re-perceive, to build community by trying to make that space of reimagination for others. Writing provides a way to do that."

While she awaits publication of her recent works, Henderson is at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which awarded her a two-year Mellon Postdoctoral Fellowship. While in Cambridge, she is working on a new book, tentatively titled *Ugliness: A Cultural History*. This coming year, she is designing new interdisciplinary courses to teach at MIT, including "The History and Mystery of the Book" and "Museum as Muse: Wandering through Wonder."

She hopes that her students will discover what she has found through her long and varied career, especially in a line by John Cage: "This isn't about self-expression but self-alteration. How do we change with the ever-changing world in a compassionate and graceful way? How do we engage with a kind of impermanence?"