

Biographies /Autobiographies



Why Am I Reading This?

Biographies and autobiographies, perpetually popular forms of writing, allow us to observe a writer confronting himself or herself or confronting the life of another, exploring the limits of memory and the connections between past and present. Moments of spiritual insight, the loss of a loved one, childhood traumas—these sharply recalled kernels become the core, reverberating throughout the entire work. To read a biography or an autobiography is to read another human's struggle to understand himself or herself; therefore, we are likely to contemplate our own lives as well.

Autobiographies may be more common in America than elsewhere. This popularity results from our cultural emphasis on individualism and self-expression, from our long tradition of spiritual quest and self-examination, and from our historical preferences for plainly written, factual documents. In addition, the autobiography has been a major form of expression for minorities.

Book List

1. *A Bride Goes West*, by N. T. Alderson
2. *A Mormon Mother: An Autobiography*, by Annie Clark Tanner
3. *Balsamroot: A Memoir*, by Mary Clearman Blew
4. *Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life*, by Robert M. Utley
5. *Black Elk Speaks*, by John Neihardt
6. *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter*, by Janet Campbell Hale
7. *Growing Up*, by Russell Baker
8. *Hole In the Sky: A Memoir*, by William Kittredge
9. *In the Wilderness*, by Kim Barnes
10. *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions*, by John Lame Deer
11. *Letters of a Woman Homesteader*, by Elinore Stewart

12. *Messages From My Father*, by Calvin Trillin
13. *My Grandmother Smoked Cigars*, by Sabine R. Ulibarri
14. *Refuge*, by Terry Tempest Williams
15. *The Enders Hotel*, by Brandon R. Schrand
16. *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, by Ivan Doig
17. *Waiting for Snow in Havana*, by Carlos M. N. Eire

Book Summaries

A Bride Goes West

Judged from the point of view of business success, Nannie Alderson had terrible timing. She and her husband moved to Montana just as the Great Plains cattle boom was peaking and starting its decline. Unlike the legions of writers who have romanticized western life, Alderson and Smith, who wrote down Alderson's recollections, could, and did, face the facts of a life as rich in frustration and monotony as in novelty and interest. The book contains numerous clues to broad patterns of Western American history: The uncertainty of Indian/white relations, the recognition that hard work and effort did not earn their promised reward, and the process of immigrants becoming westerners.

Author Information

Nannie Alderson came to Montana from Kansas with her husband Walt in 1883. They operated a cattle ranch for a decade but moved to Miles City in 1893 so their children could attend school. In 1895, Walt died from head injuries after he was kicked by a horse. Left with four children between the ages of two and eleven, Nannie built a home for her family. She scraped by, selling home-baked bread and milk from the family's cow and catering meals. She also took in boarders. Nannie moved the family to Birney in 1902. Later in her life, Nannie earned wide acclaim for her pioneer reminiscence, *A Bride Goes West*, published in 1942.

Discussion Questions for *A Bride Goes West*

1. Alderson's life in Montana is a remarkable combination of innovation and replication. She does some things she would never have imagined herself doing, and yet in other ways, she remains very traditional, as, for instance, in her refusal to call her husband by his first name. If you stack up the examples of innovation against examples of replication, which way does the balance tilt?
2. Alderson goes to considerable trouble to record information about material things: clothing, furniture, heirlooms. These items clearly carry considerable meaning to her. Looking at particular examples, describe and explore that meaning. Why did the destruction of her possessions in the fire shake her so much? What did it mean to her, to be able to sew well?
3. What men are and what men do are very different matters, in Alderson's mind, from what women are and what women do. What does she assume to be essential male characteristics and activities, and what, in her mind, are essential female characteristics and activities? How did conditions of life on a Montana homestead blur the boundary between those traditional categories, and how did they reinforce it? Why was Alderson so astonished by men who could cook?
4. The Aldersons' attempt to prosper in ranching was certainly not a success, but is it fair, then, to call it a failure? Were the Aldersons unusual in their high level of disappointment? Should their experiences be put to work to revise the myth of the West as the region of opportunity and success, or should those experiences be dismissed as irrelevant to an inspirational faith that never relied narrowly on the facts anyway?
5. The Jeffersonian agrarian ideal called for a nation peopled by responsible, stable citizens supporting themselves on farms. Unsited to conventional farming, much of the western landscape put that ideal to a tough test. How did a late nineteenth-century open range ranch differ from a conventional farm? Why was land ownership so central to the farming ideal, and so irrelevant to the rancher in the 1880's? What made the business of ranching so unstable?
6. Why did the Aldersons move so frequently? Why would a way of life that involved so much constant, unrelenting work for both men and women end up becoming itself a romantic and enviable ideal in the late twentieth century?
7. Several times in the book, Alderson declares that, despite hardships, she found her ranch life to be full and satisfying. But despite her declarations of contentment, much of the book records hardship, isolation, loss, scarcity, exhausting labor, debts, financial struggle and defeat, headaches, toothaches, and intense anxiety and fear. How can we reach a balanced judgment in appraising her life? Was she right, and indeed fully justified, in her bouts of feeling sorry for herself? Or should we believe her when she says, after all, that she was content.
8. Consider the various examples Alderson gives of the difficulty of travel, especially her description of Montana roads (p. 218). How much of the hardship and psychological frustration of ranch life could be blamed on the difficulty of transportation? If the Aldersons had had workable roads and a pickup truck, would many of their problems have been solved?
9. To what degree is nature itself an active force in this story? How does a life lived in close, daily contact with animals differ from one in which a caged parakeet or a house cat provides the only regular contact with animal life?

A Mormon Mother

Annie Clark Tanner's book partakes of the developing autobiographical tradition, but with a difference born of her tenaciously earned individuality. Neither a defense of polygamy and the LDS who fostered it, nor an angry denunciation of the practice and its perpetrators, *A Mormon Mother* is one participant's attempt to see her life, the whole of it, in perspective. Polygamy was an overwhelming aspect of that life, and so it is not remarkable that the book begins with an explanation of the Principle, as polygamy was termed by its practitioners, carefully couched in an impersonal passive voice. Through the first chapter the scales are weighed, for and against the practice, with such honesty that what seems at first a dark glass, emerges as a mirror to life. There we may see more clearly Annie Clark Tanner's life, and, on reflection, our own lives. In Annie Tanner's struggles to balance the prophetic voice with her internal witness we see one adaptation to the human condition.

Author Information

Annie Clark was born on September 24, 1864 in Farmington, Utah. Baptized into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in 1873, Annie Clark was rebaptized a year later during a reformation movement. At sixteen in 1880, Annie took classes at the fledgling University of Utah and served as a counselor to legendary Farmington Primary President Aurelia Rogers. From 1882 to 1883 Annie Clark attended the Brigham Young Academy high school, where Karl G. Maeser acclaimed her as the most brilliant student in her class. One of her teachers was Professor Joseph Marion Tanner, and she was attracted to him. Annie became the plural wife of Joseph Marion Tanner in 1883. He became president of Utah State University and superintendent of Church schools. Annie Clark Tanner was the only female child of Mormon pioneer Ezra T. Clark to build a home in Farmington. She was the oldest daughter and second child of 10 in the family of Ezra T. Clark's second wife in polygamy, Susan Leggett.

Discussion Questions for A Mormon Mother

1. *What part of the autobiographical act seems to be stressed in Tanner's work?* In what ways does her age at the time of writing make a difference in her reconstruction of her life? What is the impact of her intended audience on her life story?
2. One question that frequently arises about human nature, and can be explored in autobiographical writing, is whether there is a core "self" that is the essential person, relatively stable over periods of time and through changing situations. How does Tanner's autobiography answer this question? What impact, if any, does her historical and religious experience have in maintaining or changing her "self"?
3. In the tradition of women's autobiographies, scholars have noted a consistent pattern among female writers to tell their stories in a matrifocal or matrilineal context, i.e. their lives are reconstructed in terms of the patterns and heritages from their mothers, grandmothers or women who fulfilled similar roles. Does the same focus exist in *A Mormon Mother*? Why does it or does it not inform Tanner's writing?
4. Critic Estelle Jelinek in *The Tradition of Women's Autobiography* argues that women's autobiographical writing reflects an identity frequently colored by a sense of inadequacy and alienation. By perceiving of themselves as "outsiders" or "other," they express a need for authentication and, paradoxically, prove their self-worth and positive accomplishments in their records of overcoming obstacles. Could you agree with Jelinek's observations in terms of Tanner's autobiography?
5. Autobiography is a reconstruction of one's life, sometimes from a great distance of time. It is never the same thing as the life lived. There is always selection involved in the retelling of life—some things emphasized in retrospect, other events or people left out, an order imposed from looking back over a period of time, etc. What do you suspect is the "autobiography" not written by Tanner?
6. It has been suggested that "the theme of this book is not a woman's life, not polygame, not Mormonism, but the human struggle between the external prophetic voice and the internal individual revelation." Discuss.
7. One observer has written that Tanner "learns from experience that exaltation, or at least earthly contentment, comes more from personal integrity and the authentic behavior of the individual acting from her own best lights than from dogged adherence to prevailing ecclesiastical pronouncement." Do you sense this dichotomy in your own life, or the lives of those around you? Are the external forces ecclesiastical? Corporate? Familial? Governmental? societal?
8. Davis Bitton's 1977 listing of Mormon diaries and autobiographies contains only about a tenth as many items by women as by men. Catalogues of the holdings of other repositories reveal similar disproportion. What does this reveal about women's place in Mormon/American culture? What does it suggest about women's self-perception? Are there indications of change in the contemporary society?
9. Obert C. Tanner, in introducing the book used the term "tragedy" to describe his mother's story. Under what definition of tragedy might that be apt? How might it be misleading?
10. The writer is circumspect in what she says about her husband. Assemble what details you can to form as clear a picture of him as she permits.
11. Read with careful attention to detail Tanner's description of her wedding day. Discuss, assessing each detail in the light of her later disavowal of plural marriage.

Balsamroot: A Memoir

In this memoir, Mary Clearman Blew traces the interlocked lives of three generations of women in the same family: Mary Blew (who now lives in Moscow, Idaho), her Aunt Imogene and mother Doris (who grew up on a failed Montana homestead), and her daughters Elizabeth and Rachel. After a life of apparent independent happiness, “Auntie” comes to live near Blew and soon begins to decline, bringing Blew to explore past lives of women in her family and to face her own longings and her own assumptions about what makes a woman’s life satisfying and full.

Author Information

Mary Blew teaches English at the University of Idaho. She grew up in Montana and is the author of two collections of short stories in addition to *All But the Waltz* (which won the 1992 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award) and *Balsamroot*. She co-edited *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Western Women Writers*.

Discussion Questions for *Balsamroot*

1. Blew shares with us a story, “Grandsir,” that her aunt wrote (64-66). What lessons on aging are in this story?
2. “Auntie and I are locked in mortal combat for our lives.” (76). Discuss. What are the terms of the conflict? How is it eventually resolved?
3. How revealing is the author’s observation that her aunt, even in her dementia “longs for just what I secretly long for: to love and be loved”? (73)
4. At least twice (4, 61) we hear the unwritten code: “never speak aloud of what you feel deeply.” This code relates to a family trait of “distance” (136) – a lack of physical touching or display of affection. How do these traits relate to Imogene’s life story and to Blew’s internal struggles? Does the experience of aging (or confronting the problems of aging) in any way help Blew in her relationship with Elizabeth?
5. What function do Imogene’s diaries serve in the novel for the reader? For the narrator?
6. Imogene kept herself busy, always the aunt on the fringes of family. On page 192, Blew writes of Imogene’s “fear of being alone—the fear of annihilation” in connection with the way she lived her life. Comment on this idea.
7. On page 203, Blew writes “Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned—for years I would have disagreed with Yets, believed that the only heart worth having was the heart that came as a gift.” How does this sentiment tie into Imogene’s life? Into Blew’s life?
8. Blew puts together fragments from the diaries to construct the story of Imogene and Lud. What does that narrative tell us about Imogene’s life which Blew had not known? Does this knowledge bring wisdom to Blew?
9. How does Pete Daniels fit into this narrative?
10. In what way is the lowering of the Snake River in 1992 relevant to the narrative Blew is shaping for us?
11. In what ways is the horseback ride of the final chapter a fitting conclusion?

Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life

Billy the Kid is both a simple narrative of the life of Henry McCarty Antrim (alias William Bonney aka Billy the Kid) and an analysis of his place and times, and the context of his life. It provides a means for considering his real importance to American history and, particularly, American myth. In fact, Robert Utley says that his purpose is to comment on violence in American society. Utley is known primarily as a historian of the Idaho Wars. As a National Park Service historian, he produced guides for such complex sites as Custer (now Little Bighorn) Battlefield. Billy the Kid grew out of Utley's highly regarded analysis of New Mexico's Lincoln County War, High Noon in Lincoln: Violence on the Western Frontier, and is aimed, he says, at "stripping away the veneers of legendry." By the time of Billy's death in 1881, newspapers and the sensational press (such as Police Gazette) had already made of the Kid a larger-than-life outlaw chieftain. So the legend of Billy the Kid had been building for at least three years, and the manner of his death did nothing to discourage it. Within a year, Pat Garrett, in association with writer Marshall Upson, had published his own account, The Authentic Life of Billy the Kid. Fact and fiction about the Kid would evermore be inextricably intertwined.

Author Information

Robert Utley was born on October 31, 1929 in Bauxite, Arkansas. During his childhood, his parents, Don Williams Utley and Valeria Haney, moved him to northwestern Indiana, where he attended high school. Later, he attended nearby Purdue University, receiving a Bachelor of Sciences in history. He then attended Indiana University for graduate school, receiving a Master of Arts in history in 1952. Following his graduation, Utley served in the U.S. Army, and later worked for the National Park Service. Utley has written sixteen books on the history of the American West. He was a former chief historian of the National Park Service. Fellow historians commend Utley as the finest historian of the American frontier in the 19th century. The Western History Association annually gives out the Robert M. Utley Book Award for the best book published on the military history of the frontier and western North America (including Mexico and Canada) from prehistory through the 20th century. Utley lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with his wife Dr. Melody Webb, also a historian.

Discussion Questions for Billy the Kid: A Short and Violent Life

1. Though it is difficult to do, try to reconstruct what you knew and thought you knew about Billy the Kid before you read Utley's biography. How do the facts of his life correspond to your understanding of his life?
2. Myth is a narrative (which can be true or partly true) that helps us to explain our world. The myth of the West is a complex of many myths and symbols. It helps define—in both positive and negative ways—what it means to be an American. How does the narrative of Billy the Kid's life contribute to the myth; that is, in what ways is Billy the Kid's life a symbol, and of what?
3. Do the facts of the Kid's life undermine or sustain the myth?
4. Is Billy the Kid a hero? If so, to whom? To what other western heroes or outlaw heroes can he be compared? (Are there any heroes in Billy the Kid?)
5. Do women play a role in this story? How do the women confirm or break stereotype? Are there women here about whom you would like to know more?
6. Does "stripping away the veneers of legendry" to reveal the "real" Billy the Kid make him more important to western history and myth? Less important? Does it change anything?
7. There seems truly to have been a chivalric "code of the West." How is it manifested in Billy the Kid's story?
8. A frequent theme in discussions of the American character and American literature is one of innocence—the naïve seeker, the American Adam, the innocent in the midst of corruption. How is "innocence" a theme in Billy the Kid?
9. To what extent is Billy the Kid's story influenced by what Utley calls the "cultural medley (p. 18) of southern New Mexico?

Black Elk Speaks

Black Elk Speaks is the unusual product of a cooperative venture by a Sioux holy man and a white poet. Unlike some other Indian life histories, Black Elk's story was not told simply as a result of a white man's Indian fieldwork. The first time John Neihardt met Black Elk, the elderly Sioux told him, "What I know was given to me for men and it is true and it is beautiful. Soon I shall be under the grass, and it will be lost. You were sent to save it, and you must come back so that I can teach you." Despite its focus on the vision, the story contains many actual historical events. The book can be appreciated, then, at several levels. At one level, it is a history of a dramatic and tragic time for the Plains Indians from Little Big Horn to Wounded Knee. Seen in this light, the book presents a wide range of pre-reservation Indian experiences, from life on the plains lived in the old ways, to life in the arena of the soldiers' town, to the Wild West Show in Europe. At another level, the book may be appreciated as an anthropological document. In it we find the significance of the notion of visions to the Sioux, the ceremonies of the horse dance, the ghost dance and others, and many of the details of pre-reservation life, such as courting and bison hunting. At still another level, the book presents us with a kind of memorial to the sacred hoop of the Sioux nation and a record of a man's vision.

Author Information

John Gneisenau Neihardt (1881-1973) was born in a one-room cabin near Sharpsburg, Illinois. In his job as an Indian trader, he got to know many of the old "long hairs" on the Omaha reservation nearby. Deeply impressed, he wrote widely successful short stories based on these talks and also published volumes of lyric poetry that established him as one of America's most gifted young poets. Neihardt made a dangerous trip by canoe down the Missouri River which he chronicled in *The River and I* (1910). In that same year he married the sculptress Mona Martinsen (who knew him only by correspondence before they decided to marry). They would remain together almost fifty years and have four children (Enid, Sigurd, Hilda and Alice.) Neihardt met the great Lakota Sioux holy man Black Elk. The normally reclusive Black Elk declared through an interpreter: "I feel in this man beside me a strong desire to know the things of the other world. He has been sent to learn what I know." Neihardt returned the next spring to interview Black Elk and then wrote *Black Elk Speaks*. Besides being a work of great literature, *Black Elk Speaks* has been called the most influential book ever written on Native American culture and religion. Further interviews of old Lakota led to his finest novel, *When the Tree Flowered* (1951). It is a loving and precious legacy to a great people.

Discussion Questions for Black Elk Speaks

1. Although this book is considered an autobiography, John Neihardt acknowledges his part in both creative and editorial aspects of the book. Does this interference make the book seem less Black Elk's story to you? How do the preface and postscript frame the story?
2. Any autobiography must select which events and details of a life to include. Much of what is included in this book is determined by its significance to Black Elk's vision. Considering the central position Black Elk's vision has in the book, why do you think the book begins with the pipe offering and ends with Black Elk and the author on Harney Peak? Who is doing the selecting in the book, Neihardt or Black Elk or both?
3. In the 1960's and 1970's this book received tremendous attention from American young people. What do you suppose the appeal of the book was to those non-Indian readers? What about Black Elk's vision and his story transcends the Indian experience?
4. Although most of this story is told by Black Elk through John Neihardt, Neihardt also includes recollections of other elderly Sioux. What do these other voices contribute?
5. At the center of your book are illustrations by Standing Bear. How do these illustrations support what you see as central elements of the book? Notice how many focus on Black Elk, how many on the tribe, on the vision?
6. Many autobiographies trace the author's growth in relation to a central dream or goal. We might see Black Elk's vision in this light. How does Black Elk's acceptance of his vision change throughout the book? How does his conduct change because of the vision?
7. Although Black Elk is certainly the central figure in this book, it is also the story of the Sioux nation. Consider the momentous events in Black Elk's life—his first vision, his healing ability, his experience in the Wild West show—and show how the dual focus remains throughout the book. Can you think of anything in the book that seems to have been included only to illuminate Black Elk? Can you think of any events that seem to have been included solely to demonstrate the philosophy of the Sioux nation?
8. In the dual focus mentioned above, this book differs significantly from many autobiographies; however, can you think of other Americans who have been directed by a vision, albeit a very different kind?
9. Certain sections of this book may be difficult to read because of the violence, for example in "The Fight with Three Stars." Although atrocities by both whites and Indians are recounted, we see the mind frame of the Indians much more closely. At times there is very little remorse evidenced. Why do you think Neihardt chose to include these details of battle?

Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter

Janet Campbell Hale's collection of autobiographical essays reflects on her youth as a member of a poor, troubled Indian family and on connections between her own identity and Indian culture and history. Lyrical, angry, caught up in the process of writing and self-creation, Hale explores what it means to her to be an Indian in contemporary America.

Although an occasional concern appeared regarding matters of historical accuracy, reviews of *Bloodlines* were almost unanimously enthusiastic. "A remarkable tale of fortitude," wrote Donna Seaman of what she described as "eight brooding but brave essays." Sherry L. Smith, writing in *Journal of American History*, called it "a depressing book," but also "an important book," and while she pointed out a historical error, she stressed that *Bloodlines* is not primarily history, but "a forceful, intensely personal statement of an Indian woman's attempt to reconcile a difficult past with an ambiguous future." *Bloodlines* won an American Book Award in 1994.

Author Information

Janet Campbell Hale, born in 1947, is a member of the Coeur d'Alene tribe. Growing up on reservations and in cities around the Northwest, she dropped out of high school by age fifteen, her efforts at finishing school having been disrupted by her transient family. She married at age 18, had a son, and was divorced within year. As a struggling single mother, she attended City College of San Francisco and procured scholarships and financial aid that helped her earn her B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley. In 1970 she married Stephen Dinsmore Hale and gave birth to their daughter Jennifer. She received her M.A. in English from UC Davis in 1984 and the following year published her highly acclaimed novel, *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*. She has taught at several colleges and universities as a writer-in-residence and visiting professor, including appointments as the Richard Thompson Lecturer at Iowa State University in Ames in 1986, the Claremont Lecturer at College of Illinois in Springfield in 1995, and the Visiting Professor of Native America Literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1998. She has published several books of poems, short fiction, several works for children, and two novels. She currently lives in the reservation town of De Smet, Idaho.

Discussion Questions for *Bloodlines*

1. What do you make of the subtitle “The Odyssey of a Native Daughter?” What are the features of Hale’s odyssey?
2. Discuss the notion of home in *Bloodlines*.
3. Do you find the conclusion to this memoir to be satisfying? And if not, what do you make of it?
4. Hale’s writing has been described as using nonlinear treatment of time. For example, she writes about her terrible childhood with her alcoholic father and unfair, bitter, and cynical mother, followed by affectionate memories of the reconciliation scene in the hospital at her mother’s deathbed in “Daughter of Winter.” She’s middle-aged then but 19 in the next essay, then a good deal older thereafter. Do you read this as exemplifying awkward composition, or as representing a different way of looking at life and the world?
5. Did the jump from childhood to post-college leave too much out of her memoir or was it okay since Hale states, “I’m in fact doing this [writing] for therapeutic, not artistic reasons” (5)? Or do you buy that premise at all? After all, by the time she wrote this book, she’d had two other books published, and her novel *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture* (1985) was highly regarded. How would this sometimes depressing book serve any therapeutic purpose?
6. Hale says she was “torn between writing a novel that was true to my own vision and one that presented a positive image of Indian people” (xxii). What, if anything, does a writer “owe” to his or her people, whether one perceives that as family, ethnic group, or nationality? Is it all too easy to answer “nothing—the writer owes it only to herself to write the truth as she sees it”? This does reach to the very real problem of audience. For whom, other than herself, is Janet Campbell Hale writing here? Do you suppose many Coeur d’Alene have read this book? Or have admired it? Some reviewers have described Hale in *Bloodlines* as a “strong independent woman” who emerges successfully from her struggles with a dysfunctional family. Do you agree?
7. Do you think Hale’s suffering inflicted by her own family was more traumatic than the racism she faced from white/Anglo society? In *Bloodlines*, Hale does not represent a conventional mother-daughter relationship, yet there are some signs of the bond between the two. Discuss this.
8. Hale claims that when autobiography is used as “a basis for fiction,” as in her novel, *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*, “a rearrangement, a transformation must occur” (12) and in fiction “Real life comes into play only insofar as it can serve the purpose of art” (15). This might be worth reflecting upon in its own right, but what about the matter of “transformation” when it comes to autobiography or memoir? Do we as readers expect it—even demand it? And does it happen here? Do we tend to expect or even demand reconciliation at the end of such writings?
9. Do “all families have a scapegoat” as Hale declares on pp. 74-5, where she uses some form of that work no fewer than 8 times in 20 lines of text? Does your family have a “scapegoat”? *Should* it?

The Enders Hotel

In the center of the rural boomtown of Soda Springs, Idaho, stands the historic Enders Hotel, Café, and Bar, a three-story brick building that has been many things to many people. But to one family who bought it as an attempt to renew themselves it was home, a place they desperately tried to hold on to and yet, after seventeen years of living there, the very place from which they wanted to escape.

Growing up under its leaking roof, Brandon R. Schrand watched a cast of broken characters pass through the hotel doors—an alcoholic artist, a forgotten boxing champ, an ex-con, a homeless family—and tried to find his own identity among those revolving faces. Haunted by a father he had never seen, he tested the faces of those drifters for familiarity. Winner of the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize, *The Enders Hotel* reveals the promises and warnings of western boomtown life—stories of alcoholism, murder, betrayal, hope, and finally, redemption.

Author Information

Brandon R. Schrand is the author of *The Enders Hotel: A Memoir*, the 2007 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize winner, a 2008 School Library Journal Best Adult Books for High School Students selection, and a 2008 Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Utne Reader*, *Tin House*, *Shenandoah*, *The Missouri Review*, *Columbia*, *Colorado Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *River Teeth*, *Ecotone*, *Isotope*, and numerous other publications. He also has essays forthcoming in several anthologies including *Borne on Air: Essays by Idaho Writers* (EWU Press); *Now Write!: Nonfiction Writing Exercises From Today's Best Writers and Teachers* (Tarcher/Penguin); and *The Book of Dads: Essays on the Joys, Perils, and Humiliations of Fatherhood* (Ecco/Harper Collins). He has won the 2006 Willard R. Espy Award, *Shenandoah's* 2008 Carter Prize, the Pushcart Prize, two Pushcart Prize Special Mentions, and has had Notable Essays in both the *Best American Essays* 2007 and 2008. A two-time grant recipient of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, he lives in Moscow, Idaho, with his wife and two children where he coordinates the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Idaho.

Discussion Questions for The Enders Hotel

Growing Up

Growing Up (1982) Journalist Russell Baker's real-life story demonstrates that despite hardships, the American Dream is actually possible. Born during the Depression, Baker learns early that hard work may go unrewarded in economic downturns. But pluck and luck win out in this funny and touching memoir. Baker triumphs in the end, rising from a newspaper delivery boy to columnist at the *New York Times*.

Author Information

Russell Wayne Baker (born August 14, 1925, Loudoun county, Virginia, U.S.), American newspaper columnist, author, humorist, and political satirist, who used good-natured humor to comment slyly and trenchantly on a wide range of social and political matters.

When Baker was five years old, his father died. From that time on, he and his mother and one of his sisters moved frequently, living in Virginia, Maryland, and New Jersey. After graduating from Johns Hopkins University in 1947, Baker worked as a journalist for the *Baltimore Sun* (1947–54). He also wrote a lively weekly column, "From a Window on Fleet Street." At the Washington bureau of the *New York Times* (1954–62), he covered the White House, the State Department, and the Congress. In the early 1960s he began writing the "Observer" column on the paper's editorial page. In this syndicated humor column he initially concentrated on political satire, writing about the administrations of U.S. Presidents John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard M. Nixon. Moving to New York City in 1974, he found other subjects to skewer, and in 1979 he won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary. His topics included tax reform, the artist Norman Rockwell, inflation, and fear.

Baker's *Growing Up* (1982), which recalls his peripatetic childhood, won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for biography. A sequel, *The Good Times*, was published in 1989. Baker's other works include *An American in Washington* (1961), *No Cause for Panic* (1964), *Poor Russell's Almanac* (1972), and further collections of his columns. Baker also edited *The Norton Book of Light Verse* (1986) and wrote the book for the musical play *Home Again, Home Again* (1979). In 1993 he succeeded Alistair Cooke as host of the television program *Masterpiece Theatre*. In that same year he published *Russell Baker's Book of American Humor*, which, following an illuminating introduction, gives its due to figures such as Benjamin Franklin, Mark Twain, and James Thurber. Baker's final "Observer" column for the *New York Times* appeared on Christmas Day, 1998. In 2002 he published *Looking Back: Heroes, Rascals, and Other Icons of the American Imagination*.

Discussion Questions for Growing Up

1. In Russell Baker's memoir, what is the role of women in families and in the world? How does it change over the course of Russell's life?
2. Is the memoir mostly about Russell or mostly about his mother Lucy?
3. How does Russell's view of his mother change over time, as he moves from childhood to adulthood?
4. How does Russell Baker address issues of racism in his memoir? How do the issues of racism in the memoir compare to the issues of feminism?
5. How does Ida Rebecca's relationship with Lucy parallel and differ from Lucy's relationship with her own daughter-in-law Mimi?
6. Why does Russell begin and end the memoir with scenes of his senile mother in a nursing home at the end of her life?
7. Why does Russell's mother want him to "make something of himself"? In what ways does her desire that he succeed affect Russell's life?

Hole in the Sky

Hole in the Sky traces the life of William Kittredge. As a child, Kittredge grew up on his family's Warner Valley ranch in the southeastern Oregon desert country, and he felt deep connections to the land and to the cowboys who worked it. As he aged, life became more complicated, as the tensions and dissolutions within his family, new ideas about land use, and his own struggles to come to terms with himself.

Author Information

William Kittredge was born in Portland, Oregon, on August 14, 1932. His family ranched in the Warner Valley in Southeastern Oregon on the ranch his grandfather built and his father gave up law school to work on. He earned a degree in general agriculture from Oregon State University in 1954 and a M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop in 1969. He held a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, has been awarded National Endowment for the Arts grants, and the Fiction International Award for two collections of short stories. He is also the recipient of the Montana Governor's Award for Literature, and the Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Award for Excellence, and the Neil Simon Award for his work on the film *Heartland*.

Discussion Questions for *Hole in the Sky*

1. What do you think Kittredge means at the end of the opening chapter, “Falling,” when he says he wants to tell stories that are “useful”? (That is, he wants this book to be “useful.”) Do you find his stories in this memoir to be “useful”? Or were they just useful to him, but not necessarily to us as readers?

2. It has been suggested that Kittredge and many other contemporary western writers, like Ivan Doig and Mary Clearman Blew, are attempting to create a “new mythology” for the West. An appropriate jingle might go something like this: Old West, New West, False West, True West. What are the myths of the Old West (often connected with Hollywood and the novels of writers like Louis L’Amour)? To what extent does Kittredge spell out the values of the New West in this memoir, either explicitly or implicitly?

3. “We want to own everything,” Kittredge complains (66). Is property the problem? Are we due for a change in thinking about land ownership, or is Kittredge’s plea just another example of the sort of pie-in-the-sky idealism you’d expect of an academic (especially an English professor)?

4. In the best memoirs, the writers take risks, particularly with how they present (or represent) themselves. To what extent does Kittredge do that in *Hole in the Sky*? Does he alienate himself from you as a reader in the process? If so, where or how? Another way of looking at this might be to say, “I really dislike the way Kittredge did/said/wrote X.”

5. Late in the memoir Kittredge reflects on what he calls his “breakdown” (178), but he doesn’t elaborate all that much. What do you make of it? Can you detect the sources of it? What, presumably, is the cure for it?

In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in an Unknown Country

In the Wilderness is a memoir about growing up in the isolated logging camps of North Idaho during the 1960s, a work about family and identity. Kim Barnes' parents moved from the Oklahoma dustbowl to North Idaho, where her father became a logger and the family lived a modest but happy life. Then, in the economic downturn on the 1960s and with mechanization, loggers' jobs began disappearing. Barnes' father was determined to stay on, however, and the family sought community and consolation in a Pentecostal sect. This conversion had a profound effect on the family, influencing everything from dress to gender roles to fundamental assumptions about the world. At first docile, Barnes rebelled as an adolescent. Full of anecdotal detail, uncompromising and painful, the memoir depicts a young woman's struggles to discover who she is. It traces a passage into, as Barnes has written, "a wilderness that was something other than physical: the wilderness brought on by physical isolation; the wilderness that is the sexuality of a young girl coming of age in such an isolated environment; and the wilderness of our souls, from which our church helped to save us." Admitting that she still carries "resentment and bitterness," Barnes nevertheless demonstrates in this narrative that she "can live in the wilderness and outside of it, that I can embrace the whole." The book's ending depicts the narrator's return to the beloved woods of her youth. *In the Wilderness* was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in 1997.

Author Information

Kim Barnes was born in 1958 in North Idaho and grew up in isolated logging camps. In the mid-1960s, her family joined the Pilgrim Holiness Church in Pierce, becoming members of a fundamentalist sect related to snake-handlers. Barnes was a rebellious adolescent, and after her graduation from Lewiston High School (as a member of the National Honor Society) she held a variety of jobs. In the early 1980s, she enrolled in Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, studying English. There she met her husband, the poet and professor Robert Wrigley.

Barnes currently teaches at the University of Idaho and writes poetry, short stories, and memoir. Her work has appeared in a variety of literary magazines, including *Shenandoah* and *The Georgia Review*. She is co-editor with Mary Blew of *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*. In addition to *In the Wilderness*, she is also author of a second memoir, *Hungry for the World*, and several novels. She lives in Moscow, Idaho, with her husband and two children.

Discussion Questions for *In the Wilderness*

1. Barnes has written that the family's early life was "short on material wealth, but long on the riches of family and friends, and the great sheltering power of the wilderness." In what sense(s) was the young girl "sheltered" by the wilderness? How does that relationship help explain the book's ending?
2. Why do you think that Barnes' family turned to fundamentalism? What did the sect give them that was lacking, or that they wanted, in their lives?
3. How does entering the church change their lives? Does it make sense to you that the young girl at first embraces this new orientation with her parents?
4. Why does she rebel? Do you, as a reader, have sympathy for her rebellion?
5. What are some of the ways that you might define "wilderness," as the term is used in this book? How do these various sorts of wildernesses help the narrator to "shape [her] heart and soul" and "face [her] demons," as one book description puts it?
6. Barnes told an interviewer that "personal nonfiction destabilizes. It redefines the present, and tells us how to act now." She has also written, "I want to trace my own journey as I remember and then remake my past." In what respect does a writer of memoir necessarily "remake" the past? How could such an act "redefine the present?"
7. Barnes makes it clear that she has turned her back on her parents' fundamentalism. Is this book's narrator still a person of faith? In what?
8. Is this an indictment of industrial progress? Of the changes that come along with it?
9. Can you tell that Barnes is a poet from her prose style? The first chapter especially seems poetic in its approach.
10. Barnes takes a lot of liberties in recreating the past and portraying her memories (and others' thoughts) in great detail. Is this dishonest? A reviewer on Amazon thinks so and compares the text to *A Million Little Pieces* as a work of fiction.
11. Is there any sense of resolution to the story?

Lame Deer Seeker of Visions

Colonialism in North America did not stop with the Revolution of 1776. It had new names: "Westward expansion", "Manifest Destiny"; but those who were called pioneers still did the same things based on the same values that caused colonialism in the first place. The text, *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions* was originally published in 1972 and is the story of both Lame Deer and the Lakota nation as they were affected by our expansion. It gives us the history and brings us up to date on the continued oppression of America's native population. The story Lame Deer tells is one of harsh youth and reckless manhood, shotgun marriage and divorce, history and folklore as rich today as ever—and of his fierce struggle to keep pride alive, though living as a stranger in his own ancestral land.

Author Information

John (Fire) Lame Deer was born around the turn of the last century on the Rosebud Reservation in South Dakota. He is a full-blooded Sioux and has been many things in his life including a rodeo clown, a painter, a sheep herder, and a thief. Above all, though, he was a Lakota holy man.

Richard Erdoes was born in the old Austro-Hungarian Empire. He would read books that, though not historically accurate, cast American Indians in the role of hero. After he grew up, he moved to the United States to escape Nazi rule. He met Lame Deer during Martin Luther King Jr.'s peace march in New York City in 1967. This was the beginning of the collaboration that would last the next four years. Richard has since written several more books.

Discussion Questions for *Lame Deer Seeker of Visions*

1. Why is this book dedicated to “all the medicine men of the Sioux nation”?
2. There are many comparisons between Sioux and Anglo life and societies. Is there an overall pattern to these comparisons? What do Lame Deer/Erdoes want us to get from these comparisons?
3. What is Lame Deer’s attitude towards anthropology and anthropologists? Why do you think he feels this way?
4. What is the difference between Lame Deer’s training as a medicine man and training to become a doctor in medical school?
5. Were any of the Sioux child-rearing practices striking in their differences from what is common in Anglo society? How so?
6. What is Lame Deer’s attitude towards museums filled with Indian artifacts? Why?
7. How has his grandfather’s history affected him?
8. What are the most important things he remembers from his first view of a white person?
9. How does Erdoes’ religious upbringing prepare him for his encounter with Lame Deer?
10. Why doesn’t Lame Deer learn to speak much English in school? Do you think this episode is typical of the way services were usually delivered on Indian reservations? If so, do you have any reason to believe that things have improved since he was a young person?
11. Describe the practice of dentistry Lame Deer experienced on the Sioux reservation. What was the practice of dentistry like in small towns throughout the West at this same time historically?
12. How does Erdoes establish his credibility as a white writer with the sensitivity and experience to adequately handle this material?
13. Is there any information in the book that helps you understand why the suicide rate among Indian teenagers is so high?
14. Why does Lame Deer feel so proud of the old man who resists being moved out of his tent and into a house? What do you feel about this event?
15. Think about the “something” inside Lame Deer that wants to be free. What do you think it is? How can you talk about it? Why/how does it release and “gladden” all the plants and animals on earth?
16. What makes a *heyoka* as powerful as an atom bomb?
17. How does Lame Deer link the sun dance to the crucifixion?
18. According to Lame Deer, how can you tell a good medicine man from a bad one?
19. Why does Lame Deer feel that Indians need not to be concerned with population control?
20. What is the significance of the birth of twins?

Letters of a Woman Homesteader

Elinore Pruitt Stewart's letters were written over a five-year period to her former employer. She gives us, in her letters, the life of an "ordinary" woman. While her descriptions of nature and friends and work and food are sensory and ebullient, her prose might best be termed reticent when she is discussing marriage and childbirth. This reticence is common in frontier journals of women. For example, it is a full 3 ½ years after the beginning of her correspondence with Mrs. Coney when Stewart finally confides in her that she has been married for most of that time. The reader senses this reticence, a form of modesty, on Stewart's part, and it gives suspense and piquancy to the reading experience. The weaving together in Stewart's letters of ebullience and reticence, joy and sorrow, optimism and perseverance, makes modern life seem bland indeed.

Author Information

Stewart was born in 1876 in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and raised in Oklahoma. She taught herself to read and write, never being the beneficiary of formal schooling. An orphan at a young age, she raised eight younger siblings. Her marriage to a civil engineer brought her to Kansas; she was widowed four years later, when Jerrine, her daughter, was a month old. The two embarked on an impoverished and nomadic existence, which ultimately yielded this rich and poignant volume of letters. Stewart died in 1933, after a long and happy second marriage and a successful career as rancher.

Discussion Questions for Letters of a Woman Homesteader

1. Why did Elinore agree to become Mr. Stewart's housekeeper?
2. Why does Elinore write Mrs. Coney? Why does she apologize so often in her letters?
3. Why did Elinore marry Mr. Stewart after six weeks?
4. Explain how Elinore got her own homestead.
5. Elinore has a philosophy about female homesteading. What is it? Why should women do it?
6. Explain Elinore's conception of single motherhood; compare and contrast it with present-day models of single motherhood.
7. How does Elinore handle death in the book?
8. Which of Elinore's stories impacted you most? Why?

Messages From My Father

Calvin Trillin, the celebrated *New Yorker* writer, offers a rich and engaging biography of his father, as well as a literate and entertaining fanfare for the common (and decent, and hard-working) man. Abe Trillin had the western Missouri accent of someone who had grown up in St. Joseph and the dreams of America of someone who had been born in Russia. In Kansas City, he was a grocer, at least until he swore off the grocery business. He was given to swearing off things—coffee, tobacco, alcohol, all neckties that were not yellow in color. Presumably he had also sworn off swearing, although he was a collector of curses, such as "May you have an injury that is not covered by workman's compensation." Although he had a strong vision of the sort of person he wanted his son to be, his explicit advice about how to behave didn't go beyond an almost lackadaisical "You might as well be a mensch." Somehow, though, Abe Trillin's messages got through clearly. The author's unerring sense of the American character is everywhere apparent in this quietly powerful memoir.

Author Information

Calvin Trillin was born in Kansas City, Missouri in 1935 to Edythe and Abe Trillin. During an interview on the Charlie Rose Show on February 21, 2013 where he was discussing his book, *Dogfight*, he said his parents called him "Buddy." He attended public schools in Kansas City and went on to Yale University, where he was the roommate and friend of Peter M. Wolf, (for whose 2013 memoir, *My New Orleans, Gone Away*, he wrote an amusing foreword) and where he served as chairman of the *Yale Daily News* and was a member of the Pundits and Scroll and Key before graduating in 1957; he later served as a Fellow of the University. After a stint in the U.S. Army, he worked as a reporter for *Time* magazine before joining the staff of *The New Yorker* in 1963. Family, travel and food are also themes in Trillin's work. Three of his books *American Fried*; *Alice, Let's Eat*; and *Third Helpings*; were individually published and are also collected in the 1994 compendium *The Tummy Trilogy*. In 1965, he married the educator and writer Alice Stewart Trillin with whom he had two daughters. Alice died in 2001. The most autobiographical of his works are *Messages from My Father*, *Family Man*, and an essay in the March 27, 2006, *New Yorker*, "Alice, Off the Page", discussing his late wife. A slightly expanded version of the latter essay, entitled *About Alice*, was published as a book on December 26, 2006. In *Messages from My Father*, Trillin recounts how his father always expected his son to be a Jew, but had primarily "raised me to be an American." He has also written a collection of short stories – *Barnett Frummer Is An Unbloomed Flower* (1969) – and three comic novels, *Runestruck* (1977), *Floater* (1980), and *Tepper Isn't Going Out* (2001). This last novel is about a man who enjoys parking in New York City for its own sake and is unusual among novels for exploring the subject of parking. In 2008, The Library of America selected the essay *Stranger with a Camera* for inclusion in its two-century retrospective of American True Crime. In 2012, he was awarded the Thurber Prize for American Humor for *Quite Enough of Calvin Trillin: Forty Years of Funny Stuff*, published by Random House. In 2013, he was inducted into the New York Writers Hall of Fame. Trillin lives in the Greenwich Village area of New York City.

Discussion Questions for Messages From My Father

1.

My Grandmother Smoked Cigars

These stories present a series of carefully drawn human sketches of individuals--family members, like the grandmother and uncle Cirilo; friends and acquaintances, like the all-around cowboy Negro Aguilar; and Elacio Sandoval, the boyhood friend of the narrator whose fear of marriage and "love them or leave them" approach to the opposite sex makes exciting and humorous reading; and Roberto, who after going to town for nails, reappears after a three-year absence to continue as if nothing has happened. Ulibarri establishes a careful balance between childhood memories and an adult perspective while carefully analyzing the proud, independent, and sturdy atmosphere of rural New Mexico. Classic, legendary heroes of the Hispanic past reappear in these pages and, in the words of the author, "...sweetened and enriched my life then and, now, I remember it tenderly" (Chicano Literature: A Reference...393).

Author Information

Sabine R. Ulibarri was born in Santa Fe, New Mexico, September 21, 1919, and raised in Tierra Amarilla where he attended local schools through the twelfth grade. He taught school in Rio Arriba County and subsequently in El Rito, New Mexico. He married in 1942 and spent the following three years serving in the U.S. Air Force. He finished his Bachelor's degree at the University of New Mexico in 1947 and his M.A. degree in Spanish in 1949. He continued his graduate studies at the University of California at Los Angeles, where he taught and studied for nine years. After serving in the private sector as a consultant, he also served as chair of the Department of Modern and Classical Languages at the University of New Mexico.

Discussion Questions for My Grandmother Smoked Cigars

1. In your opinion, what is the author's overall purpose in writing these stories? A few possibilities: To preserve a family of popular history; capture and preserve local color; entertainment; to show a world not too different from our own; to preserve in writing what the mind so readily forgets.
2. What makes Ulibarri's storytelling style memorable? Why do we remember the characters and their activities long after we have read the work?
3. Is there anything unique about the author's use of vocabulary and word selection? In what ways does Spanish word use affect these works?
4. Why would he choose the story of the grandmother and her eccentricities and peculiarities for the title story?
5. What is human about these stories, and how does the author achieve that descriptive quality in his writing?
6. Why is it important to remember that the works are set in a specific environment, i.e. New Mexico, Terra Amarilla, Las Nutrias, Rio Arriba County?
7. What themes become apparent in the book? Indomitable spirit; the battle between the sexes; loss of innocence; rites of passage; initiation; the clash between cultures; religion vs. secularism; understanding the land and nature as a means of understanding the people?
8. How does the author view his own characters; are they sympathetically drawn?
9. What comment is the author making about the qualities of independence, honesty, thriftiness, being genuine, religious faith, etc.?
10. To some degree, several of the stories seem to be counterpoised (almost opposites), while others seem to reinforce messages. What could be said of the relationship between: husband and wife in *My Grandmother Smoked Cigars*, *La Kasa KK*, and *He Went For Nails, Witcheries or Tomfooleries*? And *The Penitentes*; *My Uncle Cirilo* and *Elacio Was Elacio*?
11. Why is Mano Fashico different from every other story in the volume? What could be the origins of these episodes?
12. What is unique about the cultural perspective in the story *El negro Aguilar*? What role does race play in the interpersonal relationships in the region? Is "El Negro Aguilar" black or Hispanic, or does that matter? Why?
13. Is there a distinction made between religious faith, the Church leadership and the membership, superstition and/or witchcraft? Is there something traditional about the way those relationships are handled in the Hispano community?
14. What role does Mother Nature play in the day-to-day occurrences of rural life, and what should be the person's attitude about nature? Please consider the story *El Apache* as a point of reference.
15. Are there differences and/or similarities between these stories and the works of other Chicano writers that you have read? What differences/similarities? Why do you think they exist?

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place

This is an autobiographical account which chronicles a disruptive period in the life of author Terry Tempest Williams. In 1983, several sources of stability and inspiration for Williams were shaken when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and her beloved Bear River Bird Refuge was threatened by the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake. Critical of less-than-sensitive responses to the land, Williams finds her own peace as she comes to embrace continuity in change, both in the land of her LDS ancestors and in rhythms of her family and her own life. She closes the book from a position of strength, confronting a tradition of acceptance which she now recognizes has various qualities.

Author Information

Terry Tempest Williams was born in 1955 and grew up within sight of the Great Salt lake. Her writing reflects her intimate relationship with the natural world. She is author of several books, has served as Naturalist-in-Residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History in Salt Lake City, and as Shirley Sutton Thomas Visiting Professor of English at the University of Utah. Her books include *Pieces of a White Shell*, which won the Southwest Book Award; *Coyote's Canyon*, a collection of personal narratives of Utah's desert canyons; *An Unspoken Hunger*; and *Desert Quartet*. Ms. Williams has received a Lannan Literary Fellowship in creative nonfiction along with a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1997.

Discussion Questions for Refuge

1. In what ways are birds important to this narrative, e.g. in depicting the relationship between narrator and her mother and grandmother, relevance as chapter titles, symbolic roles, etc.?
2. Name several meanings or definitions of “refuge” contained in the narrative. Is there any conclusive definition? Does the author answer her basic question, “How do we find refuge in the midst of change?”
3. What/who are healed in the story, and how? How is healing linked to nature, to religion, to state of mind, to Native American culture, etc.?
4. Terry’s mother dies after years of battling cancer. What does she learn from the experience? What does Terry learn? Is Terry’s narrative sentimentalized? How is human death linked to death in nature, and Terry’s mother’s death to the flooding Salt Lake?
5. Would you call this book a feminist document? In what ways are Terry’s mother and grandmother Mimi important in her development? What does she learn from them? In what ways does she differ from them?
6. What does Terry gain from her Mormon background? She says she is not an “orthodox” Mormon. What evidence of her unorthodoxy do you see in the book? In what larger sense is the book a description of religious or spiritual experience? What role is played by rituals? By Native American beliefs?
7. How do urban-perceived necessities clash with natural forces when the lake floods? How do people, government, and businesses respond? How does Terry respond to the flooding of her beloved bird refuge? How do the birds respond? What ironies lie in “radiation” and its role in the story? Does the final chapter, The Clan of One-Breasted Women, seem tacked on, or intrinsically linked to the book that precedes it?

This House of Sky

This House of Sky consists of three story skeins: It is an autobiography of Doig's own growing up in Montana, the story of a unique, nontraditional family trinity and how it held together through thick and thin, and a portrait of a western way of life. All three are knitted together to present a very loving, but elegiac prose poem—elegiac because of the author's mournful contemplation of his growing up which entails a wrenching away from loved ones, because the family trinity of which he was a part has dissolved through the death of two of its members, and because a way of life which sustained him throughout his childhood has also virtually passed into history. While Doig doesn't protest the dying, he does mourn and memorialize it, and he takes away those qualities of endurance, courage and honesty Charlie and Bessie Ringer and all the others presented to him as a young boy growing into manhood.

Author Information

Ivan Doig was born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, in 1939 and grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front where much of his writing takes place. His first book, the highly acclaimed memoir *This House of Sky*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. A former ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor, Doig is a graduate of Northwestern University where he received bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism. He also holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. Doig is the only living writer with books in the top dozen on both lists: *English Creek* in fiction and *This House of Sky* in non-fiction. He lives in Seattle with his wife Carol, who has taught the literature of the American West.

Discussion Questions for *This House of Sky*

1. What do you think of the opening paragraph of this memoir? Does it draw you immediately into the story? Do you want to know who these people are and what happens to them?
2. Do you as the reader become aware of the landscape in Smith River Valley and the other places the Doigs lived? How might the surroundings affect the lives of the people who live there? Do the people hate the land because of how cruel it is?
3. How does the landscape shape Ivan as a person and influence his voice as a writer?
4. There is an interest in our time in how human beings establish a sense of “place.” That is, we unite in some way with the environment when this sense is felt. Does Doig create a sense of place in *This House of Sky*?
5. This is the story of a broken family. How do the Doigs cope with their loss? Compare their actions with what might happen today. How would a motherless boy be taken care of today? Are families breaking apart or are they bonding in new ways like the Doigs?
6. What did young Ivan learn about life from his unique upbringing? From his father? From his grandmother? From his mother? From his teachers? From his neighbors and those who took him in while he went to school? Who were the influences on his writing?
7. What kind of man is Charlie Doig? How would you compare him to the stereotypical western hero?
8. What was the relationship with his father like? The father took the young boy everywhere, even to saloons. How did this affect the boy, adversely or not?
9. How does Ivan break away from his family to begin his adult life? Is it opposed and traumatic, or has it been planned for? What are the impressions his fellow students and teachers have of him at Northwestern University? Is he different and maladjusted? Or can he fit in and still be different due to his upbringing?
10. Examine the tone of this book. How does it fit with what Doig was trying to say about these people? What does Doig mourn? Is this way of life truly dead? Does it matter?
11. Are there particular passages or turns of phrase that you especially liked? [Review pp. 238-9, perhaps the keenest example of Doig’s giving in to poetic, lyrical expression without the solid framework of descriptive narrative—just the mind let loose in free-form wandering, and the tongue/pen with it.]
12. What do we learn about Charlie and Ivan from his description of the nine saloons in White Sulphur Springs? How were they perceived and treated? What kinds of things matter to them? Why are those bar rounds important to Charlie (pp. 55-67)?

Waiting for Snow in Havana by Carlos Eire

Subtitled “Confessions of a Cuban Boy,” Carlos Eire’s memoir looks back to his boyhood on the eve of Fidel Castro’s takeover from Fulgencio Batista on the first of January 1959. The son of a prominent judge, Eire was born to privilege, but he says his family was not wealthy. In 1962, at the age of eleven, Carlos was flown to the United States, along with his brother Tony, two years older, as part of Operation Pedro Pan, and his mother joined them a few years later, but his father remained in Havana with his prized collection of art and Carlos’s adopted brother, the sinister Ernesto. On the cover the publishers describe the book as “both an exorcism and an ode to a paradise lost.” This often humorous memoir mingles lively accounts of boyish pranks with comments on religion that are more than half serious (Eire presently teaches philosophy and religious studies at Yale University). His sometimes doting father considers himself to be the reincarnated Louis XVI, executed during the Reign of Terror in France (1793) along with his wife, Marie Antoinette (by default, Carlos’ mother). The book offers almost equal parts politics (Eire is no admirer of Castro), dysfunctional family dynamics, and religion: “Jesus H. Bungee-jumping Christ, save me!” nine year-old Carlos declares upon being told that Santa does not exist. Spanish culture, Eire concludes, “is built upon one warning: beware, all is illusion.”

Author Information

Born Carlos Nieto in Havana in 1950, a little over three-quarters of the way through his memoir, Carlos rejects his father’s surname for his mother’s, Eire, so it was as Carlos Eire that he received his bachelor’s degree from Loyola University in Chicago in 1973. He went on to receive his doctorate from Yale University, where he presently serves as Riggs Professor of History and Religious Studies. He is married and the father of two sons and a daughter. His many scholarly essays and three books published prior to *Waiting for Snow in Havana* would not have predicted that Carlos Eire would author a National Book Award winning memoir. Eire has said the memoir was the easiest for him to write and that it was triggered by the Elián González affair in 2000. The seven year-old Gonzalez was rescued by the U.S. Coast Guard after his mother died on a boat smuggling them into Miami, but he was returned to Cuba and the custody of his father, despite vigorous protests from the exiled Cuban community in the United States. In a conversation appended to the memoir, Eire declares that he will not return to Cuba so long as Castro is in power: “As far as I am concerned, Fidel’s Cuba might as well be the deepest circle of hell.”

Discussion Questions for *Waiting for Snow in Havana*

1. As a boy Carlos Eire appears to loathe and fear lizards, even common chameleons. Do you find any explanation for his anxiety about them? He and his older brother Tony enjoy torturing lizards (cutting off their tails and blowing them apart with firecrackers), but why? Does this behavior combined with acts that some would see as harmful to others and dangerous to themselves suggest something pathological, or does it come down to boys-will-be-boys?
2. The father in this memoir plays games with his sons (like car surfing and pea-shooting), but refuses to accompany them to the United States, and he appears to shift his affection from them to the adopted Ernesto, whom Eire insists is a “pervert.” Moreover, early in the memoir Carlos calls out, in phrasing that suggests Jesus on the cross, “Father, Father, why did you abandon me?” (88). How do you account for the father’s behavior? Do you think Carlos understands this himself?
3. Playfully, but probably with some serious intent as well, Eire claims he can outdo Thomas Aquinas in his five proofs of the existence of God, and in the course of his memoir he produces seven such “proofs.” What are some of these, and what do you make of them? How seriously do you take Eire’s statements about philosophy and religion?
4. How does American popular culture, mostly in the form of movies, influence young Carlos’ attitudes and behavior? Presumably the Marxist idealism of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara was aimed at the values implicit in such films; moreover, it was aimed at the privileged classes in Cuba, which included the middle class to which Carlos’ family belonged. To what extent, then, is this memoir “political”? Do you agree with Eire’s political views? How well the mass of Cubans have fared under Castro remains a subject of considerable debate, but Eire’s point of view is clear enough. Do you think he’s probably right, or is he simply a victim of his own class bias?
5. Looking back at his preadolescent boyhood, Carlos Eire reveals many fears, not just of lizards, but of certain paintings in his father’s collection (notably of religious figures) and of sexual abuse or molestation by perverts (late in the memoir, in fact, a pervert pulls a knife on him). What is Eire’s point with this sort of thing? Does he see himself as having been particularly vulnerable as a child?
6. Throughout most of the memoir Carlos Eire’s mother, whom he describes as beautiful but crippled, appears to be passive, but it is she who takes the most decisive action when Castro takes over. How much does Eire reveal about this “Marie Antoinette”? His tribute to her appears to be the penultimate chapter (39). Does a review of this chapter affect your sense of her in any way?
7. So what does this memoir come to at the end? How much of it is written out of anger and regrets (despite Eire’s apparent success in the United States)? Is the book in some ways a confession? “I loved to steal,” he tells us at one point. Or is Eire boasting about his boyish misbehavior mostly for the fun of it? And what do you make of his reflections on death at the end of the last chapter?