



## Book Summaries and Discussion Questions

The year 2016 marks the 100th awarding of the Pulitzer Prizes. This theme collects some of the winners of the Pulitzer Prize, the country's most prestigious awards and the most sought-after accolades in journalism, letters, and music.

### Book List

1. All the Light We Cannot See by Anthony Doerr
2. Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner
3. Empire Falls by Richard Russo
4. Growing Up by Russell Baker
5. Honey in the Horn by H.L. Davis
6. March by Geraldine Brooks
7. Pilgrim at Tinker Creek by Annie Dillard
8. The Age of Innocence by Edith Wharton
9. The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck
10. The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway
11. To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

# Book Summaries

## All the Light We Cannot See

Marie-Laure lives with her father in Paris near the Museum of Natural History, where he works as the master of its thousands of locks. When she is six, Marie-Laure goes blind and her father builds a perfect miniature of their neighborhood so she can memorize it by touch and navigate her way home. When she is twelve, the Nazis occupy Paris and father and daughter flee to the walled citadel of Saint-Malo, where Marie-Laure's reclusive great-uncle lives in a tall house by the sea. With them they carry what might be the museum's most valuable and dangerous jewel. In a mining town in Germany, the orphan Werner grows up with his younger sister, enchanted by a crude radio they find. Werner becomes an expert at building and fixing these crucial new instruments, a talent that wins him a place at a brutal academy for Hitler Youth, then a special assignment to track the resistance. More and more aware of the human cost of his intelligence, Werner travels through the heart of the war and, finally, into Saint-Malo, where his story and Marie-Laure's converge.

Doerr's "stunning sense of physical detail and gorgeous metaphors" (*San Francisco Chronicle*) are dazzling. Deftly interweaving the lives of Marie-Laure and Werner, he illuminates the ways, against all odds, people try to be good to one another. Ten years in the writing, a National Book Award finalist, *All the Light We Cannot See* is a magnificent, deeply moving novel from a writer "whose sentences never fail to thrill" (*Los Angeles Times*).

## Author Information

Anthony Doerr was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. He is the author of the story collections *The Shell Collector* and *Memory Wall*, the memoir *Four Seasons in Rome*, and the novels *About Grace* and *All the Light We Cannot See*, which was awarded the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the 2015 Andrew Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Fiction. Doerr's short stories and essays have won four O. Henry Prizes and been anthologized in *The Best American Short Stories*, *New American Stories*, *The Best American Essays*, *The Scribner Anthology of Contemporary Fiction*, and lots of other places. His work has won the Barnes & Noble Discover Prize, the Rome Prize, the New York Public Library's Young Lions Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an NEA Fellowship, an Alex Award from the American Library Association, the National Magazine Award for Fiction, four Pushcart Prizes, two Pacific Northwest Book Awards, four Ohioana Book Awards, the 2010 Story Prize, which is considered the most prestigious prize in the U.S. for a collection of short stories, and the Sunday Times EFG Short Story Award, which is the largest prize in the world for a single short story.

## Discussion Questions for *All the Light We Cannot See*

1. The book opens with two epigraphs. How do these quotes set the scene for the rest of the book? Discuss how the radio plays a major part in the story and the time period. How do you think the impact of the radio back then compares with the impact of the Internet on today's society?
2. The narration moves back and forth both in time and between different characters. How did this affect your reading experience? How do you think the experience would have been different if the story had been told entirely in chronological order?
3. Whose story did you enjoy the most? Was there any character you wanted more insight into?
4. When Werner and Jutta first hear the Frenchman on the radio, he concludes his broadcast by saying "*Open your eyes and see what you can with them before they close forever*" (pages 48–49), and Werner recalls these words throughout the book (pages 86, 264, and 409). How do you think this phrase relates to the overall message of the story? How does it relate to Madame Manec's question: "Don't you want to be alive before you die?" (page 270)?
5. On page 160, Marie-Laure realizes "This...is the basis of his fear, all fear. That a light you are powerless to stop will turn on you and usher a bullet to its mark." How does this image constitute the most general basis of all fear? Do you agree?
6. Reread Madame Manec's boiling frog analogy on page 284. Etienne later asks Marie-Laure, "Who was supposed to be the frog? Her? Or the Germans?" (page 328) Who did you think Madame Manec meant? Could it have been someone other than herself or the Germans? What does it say about Etienne that he doesn't consider himself to be the frog?
7. On page 368, Werner thinks, "That is how things are...with everybody in this unit, in this army, in this world, they do as they're told, they get scared, they move about with only themselves in mind. *Name me someone who does not.*" But in fact many of the characters show great courage and selflessness throughout the story in some way, big or small. Talk about the different ways they put themselves at risk in order to do what they think is right. What do you think were some shining moments? Who did you admire most?
8. On page 390, the author writes, "To shut your eyes is to guess nothing of blindness." What did you learn or realize about blindness through Marie-Laure's perspective? Do you think her being blind gave her any advantages?
9. One of Werner's bravest moments is when he confronts von Rumpel: "All your life you wait, and then it finally comes, and are you ready?" (page 465) Have you ever had a moment like that? Were you ready? What would you say that moment is for some of the other characters?

10. Why do you think Marie-Laure gave Werner the little iron key? Why might Werner have gone back for the wooden house but left the Sea of Flames?

11. Von Rumpel seemed to believe in the power of the Sea of Flames, but was it truly a supernatural object or was it merely a gemstone at the center of coincidence? Do you think it brought any protection to Marie-Laure and/or bad luck to those she loved?

12. When Werner and Marie-Laure discuss the unknown fate of Captain Nemo at the end of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Marie-Laure suggests the open-endedness is intentional and meant to make us wonder (page 472). Are there any unanswered questions from this story that you think are meant to make us wonder?

13. The 1970s image of Jutta is one of a woman deeply guilt-ridden and self-conscious about her identity as a German. Why do you think she feels so much guilt over the crimes of others? Can you relate to this? Do you think she should feel any shame about her identity?

14. What do you think of the author's decision to flash forward at the end of the book? Did you like getting a peek into the future of some of these characters? Did anything surprise you?

15. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn once wrote that "the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being." *All the Light We Cannot See* is filled with examples of human nature at its best and worst. Discuss the themes of good versus evil throughout the story. How do they drive each other? What do you think are the ultimate lessons that these characters and the resolution of their stories teach us?

## Angle of Repose

Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 for its distinction as a novel about the West that transcended "regional" and "pioneer" stereotypes. Geologically, the angle of repose is the slope at which rocks stop rolling down a mountain. In the novel, it serves as a metaphor for the accommodation, the equilibrium, that Susan and Oliver Ward arrive at in relation to each other and to the circumstances of their lives. In its larger application, it suggests "the uneasy truce in which all paired opposites rest," the opposites in the marriage of the Wards and in the culture of the American West. Lyman Ward, the narrator, sifts through his grandmother's letters trying to penetrate the "hidden lode of Susan Ward's woe." Himself orphaned as a small boy and brought up by this grandmother, he is now crippled, fifty-eight years old, and a retired historian. In his searching, he comes upon what turned the marriage of his grandparents into an unloving, unforgiving truce that lasted the rest of their lives, and in doing so confronts some hard truths in his own existence. Lyman ultimately muses that there may be some intersection of lines after all, "the angle at which lines prop each other up," even though "the leaning together from the vertical produces only a false arch." The false arch lacks a keystone, but "the false arch may be as much as one can expect in this life." That may be the book's ultimate wisdom, a wisdom Lyman (and we) may or may not be big enough to accept: "Wisdom is knowing what you have to accept."

## Author Information

Although sometimes categorized as merely a "western writer," Wallace Stegner (1909–1993) was more than that: he wrote 30 books, both fiction and nonfiction, served as a mentor to many young writers, and worked in support of conservation issues throughout his lifetime. Wallace Stegner was born on February 18, 1909, in the rural community of Lake Mills, Iowa. Most of his childhood was spent moving from place to place as his father, George Stegner, a restless schemer, searched for a way to get rich quick. The family finally settled in Saskatchewan, Canada, although Stegner's father alternated between living with his wife and two sons to roaming the frontier, in search of his ultimate opportunity. George Stegner's life ended violently when he killed a woman he was with and then took his own life. Stegner purposely set out to be unlike his father by becoming bookish. His father became, for Stegner, the model for many characters in his books: characters who relentlessly and thoughtlessly sought personal gain without any consideration for who or what they destroyed in the process. Stegner graduated with a bachelor's degree in 1930 (Utah), a master's degree in 1932 and a doctorate in 1935 (Iowa).

He worked as an instructor at various institutions, and in 1937, published his first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, which won first prize in a contest sponsored by the publishing company Little, Brown. He won \$2500, which at that time was a fortune. The book became a literary and financial success and helped gain Stegner a position as an instructor at Harvard University. Stegner married Mary Stuart Page in 1934. The couple enjoyed a 59-year marriage and had one son, Stuart Page.

## Discussion Questions for *Angle of Repose*

1. Whom does Lyman like best—his grandmother or his grandfather? Do his sympathies change as he studies their lives? As the reader, do yours?
2. Is Oliver Ward's story one of success or failure? Was he "too honest?" Is it possible to have too much integrity?
3. Was Susan Ward's destiny determined by the era in which she lived and the limitations that era placed on a woman's freedom? Do you think of her as a woman ahead of her time? How does Susan's life in the West compare to her life in the East?
4. Are there differences today between people living in the West and the East? What is it that makes one a "Westerner"?
5. What does the term "angle of repose" mean?
6. Susan often wonders if she made the right decision in marrying Oliver. Would someone like Thomas Hudson have brought her more happiness? What do you imagine Susan's life would have been like if she had stayed in the East? How did her years in the West shape her character?
7. Why does the novel end with Susan's return to Idaho? Why is it significant that the details of her life in the house in Grass Valley are given to us through the present only?
8. Does Lyman Ward (the narrator of the novel) finally manage to reconcile his past with his present, to find an acceptable identity of his own, or to make peace with himself?
9. Is Lyman correct in concluding that a friendship like Susan and Augusta's is not possible today? Do you agree with his reasons?
10. Lyman's stoic determination to "go it alone" is, in some ways, reminiscent of the traditional "maverick hero" of the West. To what extent is Lyman in fact a maverick hero? Is your perception of him different at the end of the book than at the beginning?

## Empire Falls

*Empire Falls* author Richard Russo delves deep into the blue-collar heart of America as he tells the stories of the inhabitants of Empire Falls. This novel provides a panoramic view of small town life. It is set in a former logging and textile town in Maine. The story follows the misadventures of Miles Roby, a manager of a greasy spoon called the Empire Grill, and the problems of possible divorce, ailing mother, and his business as well as his relationship with his teenage daughter. That relationship is the age-old story of generations trying to understand one another and of the joys and heartbreaks that come out of the connection.

## Author Information

Born on July 15, 1949, Richard Russo grew up in a small town in upstate New York. Russo received his B.A. in English at the University of Arizona along with his Ph.D. in American Literature in 1980. He spent a year working on his fiction writing skills while completing his dissertation and earned a master of fine arts degree in creative writing in 1981. When Russo wrote his first book, *Mohawk*, he was still employed full-time as a college teacher and would work on his novels at a local diner between classes. After the success of *Nobody's Fool* (the book and the movie), he was able to give up teaching and pursue his career in writing. He retired at the age of forty-seven. Russo is known for his depiction of blue-collar life in depressed Northeastern towns and the struggles of emotionally scarred sons coming to terms with absent or abusive father figures. He has been regarded by many leading critics as the most important writer about Main Street, USA. He is a contemporary American novelist who writes well with free-handed humor about working-class life. Russo has said that he wants that which "is hilarious and that which is heartbreaking to occupy the same territory in the books because he thinks they very often occupy the same territory in life, much as we try to separate them." In 2002, Richard Russo received the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished fiction by an American author for *Empire Falls*.

## Discussion Questions for Empire Falls

1. Richard Russo's description of the town of Empire Falls is as memorable and vivid as his portraits of the people who live there. How do the details he provides about the town's setting and its streets, buildings and neighborhoods create more than a physical backdrop against which the story is played out? How does the use of flashbacks strengthen the sense of the town as a "living" character?

2. "One of the good things about small towns, Miles's mother had always maintained, was that they accommodated just about everyone" [p. 21]. Is this an accurate description of Empire Falls? Which characters in particular benefit from this attitude? What influences the level of tolerance Miles is willing to extend to Max Roby, Walt Comeau and Jimmy Minty, all of whom are constant irritants to him? What does he see as the redeeming characteristics in each of them?

3. Why is his relationship with Tick so important to Miles? In what ways is it reminiscent of his mother's attachment to him? How do Grace's expectations for Miles, as well as her ultimate disappointment in him, shape the way he is raising Tick?

4. Even before the full story of Grace and Max's marriage is revealed, what hints are there that Grace was less than the ideal wife and mother Miles remembers and reveres?

5. Why does Miles choose to accept his mother's version of events of their trip to Martha's Vineyard, even though it entails a betrayal of his father [pp. 136–47]?

6. When Miles finally realizes who Charlie Mayne really is, does it change his feelings about Grace in a significant way? Would he have felt differently if Grace were still alive and able to answer his questions [pp. 338–9]?

7. How does Miles's own situation—particularly his separation from Janine and his discovery of the relationship between Charlene and David—color his reaction to his mother's affair? How does his brief conversation with Max about Grace and Charlie [p. 373] shed light on the relationship between father and son?

8. Janine calls Miles "The World's Most Transparent Man" [p. 42] and Tick says, "It's not like you don't have any [secrets] ...It's just that everybody figures them out" [p. 107]. Does Mrs. Whiting share this image of Miles? What evidence is there that she sees and understands more about the "real" Miles than the people closest to him do?

9. How does Russo use minor characters to fill out his portraits of the main figures? What roles do Horace Weymouth, Bea Majeski, Charlene and Otto Meyer play in shaping your impressions of and opinions about Miles, Janine and Tick?

10. How do David's feelings about Mrs. Whiting and the Empire Grill differ from Miles's? Whose attitude is more realistic? Is David's harsh criticism of Miles's passivity [pp. 224–5] justified? What insights does it give you into David's character? Is David more content with his life than Miles is with his own, and if so, why?

11. Empire Falls traces three very different families—the Whitings, the Robys, and the Mintys—through several generations. What does each of these families represent in terms of American society in general?

## 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?

## Honey in the Horn

This Pulitzer Prize winning novel by H. L. Davis tells of the lives of Oregon pioneers. With realistic and colorful detail and rough humor, the work describes the quirky individuality and essential isolation of various frontier types of men and women, as it describes the search for a suspected murderer and the yearning relationship between a young man and a gypsy-like horse seller's daughter. The book offended a lot of Oregonians; he left Oregon but continued to write about the land he knew.

## Author Information

H. L. Davis was born in Yoncalla, Oregon, in 1896 and died in 1960. The son of a school teacher, he held many odd jobs as a youngster and later briefly attended Stanford University in 1916–17. He joined the U.S. Cavalry and served at the Mexican border before settling into writing poetry and short stories.

## Discussion Questions for Honey in the Horn

1. What are the themes of Honey in the Horn?
2. Did this book change your vision/image of the American pioneer?  
How?
3. Would you agree that this book is a mixture of humor and tragedy?  
Why?
4. Though a novel, could it just as easily be called a history book?
5. What feeling(s) did you take away or lessons did you learn from reading Honey in the Horn?
6. How would you rank H.L. David and Honey in the Horn with works of other Pulitzer prize winners of his time such as Hemingway, A.B. Guthrie, Wm. Faulkner, and Steinbeck, or even Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, the book to which Honey in the Horn is most often compared?

## March

Geraldine Brooks' *March* tells its story through the characters of another novel: *Little Women*, Louisa May Alcott's story of sisters and a mother, published in 1868, only three years after Appomattox. Brooks tells the story of the father and husband of those women, the Reverend March. In Alcott's story, he is beloved but significant mainly by his absence. In *March*, we see the story through his eyes, eyes that do not always comprehend clearly what they perceive. We travel with the chaplain into places where he is not wanted, where his values elicit ridicule and contempt. The harsh world of slavery, men, and war challenges everything the March family believes in, including one another. Brooks' novel is a lovely and powerful meditation on America as it descended into the chaos of war.

## About the Author

Australian-born Geraldine Brooks is an author and journalist who grew up in the Western suburbs of Sydney and attended Bethlehem College Ashfield and the University of Sydney. She worked as a reporter for *The Sydney Morning Herald* for three years as a feature writer with a special interest in environmental issues. In 1982 she won the Greg Shackleton Australian News Correspondents scholarship to the journalism master's program at Columbia University in New York City. Later she worked for *The Wall Street Journal*, where she covered crises in the Middle East, Africa, and the Balkans. In 2006 she was a fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies at Harvard University. She was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 2006 for her novel *March*. Her most recent novel, *Caleb's Crossing*, was a New York Times best seller. Other novels, *Year of Wonders* and *People of the Book*, are international bestsellers, translated into more than 25 languages. She is also the author of the nonfiction works *Nine Parts of Desire* and *Foreign Correspondence*. Brooks married author Tony Horwitz in Tourette-sur-Loup, France, in 1984. They have two sons—Nathaniel and Bizuayehu—a dog named Milo and a horse named Butter. They live by an old mill pond on Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts.

## Discussion Questions

1. Talk about the significance of characters' names, especially Grace. How does she help March attain grace? Also Annie's children, Prudence and Justice. Was it prudent of March and Grace to try to teach the girl to read? Who, if anyone, receives justice in this story?
2. "A Good Kind Man" (Chapter 13, and again in Ch. 17). March is saved once by the slave girl Zannah writing on the scrap who he is and that he deserves to be saved, as he is a good, kind man. Grace counsels Marmee that if she wants to bring him back to life, she must give him hope and remind him that he is a good, kind man. Is he? Explain how/why we should perceive him that way. What about his cowardice and the dire consequences it had for others? What about his decision to teach Prudence and the consequences that befell Grace? Are these the acts of a good, kind man?
3. No one is without sin, Grace tells March. "It is folly to let this self-flagellation shape your future" (266)—spoken by one who was literally whipped because of March's lack of prudence.
4. "I do not ask your absolution," she tells him (268). But isn't it March who is seeking absolution—a state of grace—from her?
5. Compare the temperaments of Grace (see p. 41 for example) and Marmee (p. 64). Marmee describes herself as a termagant [from the Oxford English Dictionary: a harsh-tempered or overbearing woman; an imaginary deity of violent and turbulent character, often appearing in morality plays].
6. Discuss communication and miscommunication between March and Marmee and "letters filled with lies." What does Marmee learn about truth and lies when she sits down to write a letter home to the girls?
7. How is March changed by his experiences, from a man of "moral certainty...who knew with such clear confidence exactly what it was that he was meant to do" (184)?
8. What does the entry from Louisa May Alcott's hospital journal add to your reading of *March*?

## Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the 1975 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction. Her solitary "Pilgrimage" along the creek that borders her property in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia, does not resemble that of Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims, who appear to have been more attracted to communal recreation than to serious reflection on nature and the understanding of the self. But in the free play of her mind over what she sees and investigates, Dillard does enjoy a sort of recreation. Whether we read the book as religious or mystical, perhaps even specifically Christian, may not matter. Certainly she is as likely to cite Thoreau, the Koran, or Pliny as she is to quote the Bible. Very much of this book reflects what Dillard *sees*, what she teaches herself to discern in the world around her; she regards herself not as a scientist, but as an "explorer." Reflecting on the praying mantis and other insects, she notes, "Fish gotta swim and bird gotta fly; insects, it seems, gotta do one horrible thing after another" (63). But just twenty pages later we encounter a very different voice: "What I call innocence is the spirit's unself-conscious state at any moment of pure devotion to any object" (82). Although she uses various kinds of humor throughout, Dillard concludes, "Divinity is not playful. The universe was not made in jest but in solemn incomprehensible earnest" (270). One must either "ignore it, or see," she observes.

## Author Information

Born Meta Ann Doak in 1945 to affluent parents in Pittsburgh, Annie Dillard recorded her girlhood experiences in *An American Childhood* (1987). Her parents were tolerant and open-minded, but she proved rebellious in high school. Dillard prospered at Hollins College (B.A., 1967), where she studied English, creative writing, and religion. She married one of her writing teachers, R.H.W. (Richard) Dillard, who has authored more than half a dozen books of poetry. They later divorced, and she has since remarried and is the mother of a daughter born in 1984. She received her master's degree at Hollins in 1968, writing a thesis on Henry David Thoreau, whose thinking and writing has profoundly influenced her work. Dillard began writing *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* while recovering from a nearly fatal case of pneumonia in 1971. Following receipt of the Pulitzer Prize in 1975, Dillard taught for three years at Western Washington University. She taught subsequently at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where she is an emeritus professor of creative writing. Her dozen published books include *Tickets for a Prayer Wheel* (1974), poems; *Holy the Firm* (1977), narrative nonfiction; *Living by Fiction* (1982), which she describes as "unlicensed literary theory"; *The Living* (1992), an epic novel set in the Pacific Northwest; and most recently, a novel set on Cape Cod, *The Maytrees* (1007), which has been praised for its "stark and lyrical awareness of the profundity of the physical world."

## Discussion Questions for Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

1. At one point Dillard writes, “I am . . . passionately interested in where I am” (128). Does it seem to you that this is what she asks of us as readers? Do you think she succeeds in that aim? Where in this book do you find that your interests in where you are and what lies about to be most fully aroused? That is, where does Dillard succeed in making you want to put down her book, take a walk outside, and look about you?
2. In the chapter entitled “Intricacy” Dillard asserts, “That there are so many details seems to be the most important and visible fact about the creation” (129). “It’s all in the details,” we sometimes say, jokingly. This book is teeming with intricate details. What might be the drawback in that? What are the advantages?
3. One might say this book is dominated by verbs of seeing (see/saw, look, watch, notice) and by the opposite nouns (Scene, view, eye, light). “It’s all a matter of keeping my eyes open,” she observes early in her book (17). Can you locate two or three passages where such language predominates? What do you suppose is Dillard’s intention? How does she get from the visual to the visionary?
4. In her chapter on fecundity Dillard asks herself (and us) what it is about that subject that “so appalls.” She has just awakened from a nightmare that involved mating Luna moths and a bed full of fish swarming “in a viscid slime” (160). Many episodes in this book involve procreation and they appear to be at least equally balanced by scenes of death, like the memorable one early on in which a giant water bug devours a frog. What do you think she is getting at here?
5. Does it seem to you that Dillard emphasizes the beauty in nature, or something else (not necessarily its opposite)? In *A River Runs Through It* Norman Maclean describes the brown trout as “being beautiful by being partly ugly.” Where do you think you might see evidence of that sort of attitude in this book?
6. What are, for you, the most memorable episodes in this book? Do they possess any features in common? Do you find yourself drawn more, for example, to the episodes involving insects, or trees, or birds, or maybe muskrats? In short, when Dillard is writing at her best, as you see it, what sort of thing is she saying? What is she seeing or thinking about?

## The Age of Innocence

Edith Wharton (1862–1937) wrote carefully structured fiction that probed the psychological and social elements guiding the behavior of her characters. Her portrayals of upper-class New Yorkers were unrivaled. *The Age of Innocence*, for which Wharton won the Pulitzer Prize in 1920, is one of her most memorable novels.

At the heart of the story are three people whose entangled lives are deeply affected by the tyrannical and rigid requirements of high society. Newland Archer, a restrained young attorney, is engaged to the lovely May Welland but falls in love with May's beautiful and unconventional cousin, Countess Ellen Olenska. Despite his fear of a dull marriage to May, Archer goes through with the ceremony—persuaded by his own sense of honor, family and societal pressures. He continues to see Ellen after the marriage, but his dreams of living a passionate life ultimately cease.

The novel's lucid and penetrating prose style, vivid characterization, and its rendering of the social history of an era have long made it a favorite with readers and critics alike.

## Author Information

Edith Newbold Jones was born January 24, 1862 into one of New York's wealthiest families. Educated by governesses on both sides of the Atlantic and self-taught in her father's hidebound library, she began writing poems and stories as a child, attempting her first novel at age eleven. When Edith was sixteen her mother had some of her adolescent verses privately printed, and later, on the recommendation of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, had one of them accepted by William Dean Howells for the *Atlantic Monthly*. Socially she followed the course of a debutante. In 1885, at the age of twenty-three, she married Edward "Teddy" Wharton, and took her place in the rarefied milieu of New York, Boston, and Newport social circles. The childless marriage was not a happy one. Teddy Wharton had a predilection towards idleness and was not particularly interested in his wife's literary ambitions. Worse, they both suffered from debilitating nervous illnesses. The marriage was maintained until 1913 when Edith divorced on grounds of her husband's infidelity. *The House of Mirth* and *The Age of Innocence* made Wharton one of the most renowned novelists in America. Wharton died in France at the age of 75.

## Discussion Questions for The Age of Innocence.

1. Why does Archer neglect to tell Countess Olenska of his engagement to May Welland, despite the fact that May has instructed him to do so?
2. Why does Archer suddenly realize that marriage is "not the safe anchorage he had been taught to think, but a voyage on uncharted seas"?
3. Why does Archer feel "oppressed" when contemplating the "factitious purity" of his betrothed?
4. Why is Countess Olenska a threat to the social order that claims Archer as one of its kind?
5. Why is the neighborhood where Countess Olenska resides a "queer quarter for such a beauty to settle in"?
6. To what is Archer referring when he thinks about his peers that "over many of them the green mould of the perfunctory was already perceptibly spreading"?
7. What does Archer mean when he thinks that "it was wonderful that...such depths of feeling could coexist with such absence of imagination"?
8. How does Archer feel about May's talent with her bow and arrow? Why does he so often feel "cheated...into momentary well-being"?
9. When Archer, at the request of Mrs. Mingott, follows the path to the shore to fetch Countess Olenska, why does he say to himself, "If she doesn't turn before that sail crosses the Lime Rock light I'll go back"?
10. What kind of "code" exists between Archer and May? How does it work? What is its origin?
11. Why does May decide to host the farewell dinner for the Countess Olenska? Why does Archer think of the dinner guests as "a band of dumb conspirators"?
12. Why does Archer walk away from a potential reunion with Countess Olenska?
13. Must social and emotional security be purchased with the sacrifice of another individual or group?
14. Is it moral and honorable to protect others at the expense of one's happiness? Is duty to one's community more important than duty to oneself?

## The Grapes of Wrath

This is the story of a desperate people, moving westward in the hope of a better life. It is at once a naturalistic epic, a dissenting tract, and a romantic gospel. It speaks to a multiplicity of human experiences and is located squarely in our national consciousness. Convinced that things *must* be better in California than they were at the time in Oklahoma, dust bowl migrants were drawn westward by luxurious visions. The reality was far different from what they had dreamed, and what they found was poverty, exploitation, and powerlessness. Instead of sweet California grapes, they found bitter grapes of resentment and anger.

## Author Information

John Steinbeck was born on February 27, 1902, in the California farming town of Salinas. After attending Stanford University for six years (and failing to complete the requirements for a degree), he went to New York City where he worked as a construction laborer and reporter. His first novel *Cup of Gold* (1929) was published after his return to California. It was a fanciful tale of allegory and romance based on the life of Henry Morgan, the pirate-governor of Jamaica. The novel was not a great success, and Steinbeck soon turned to the materials he knew best, the people and places of his native California. In the 1930's, Steinbeck published a series of novels, each set in California's central coast and valleys, which achieved wide recognition. *The Pastures of Heaven*, *The Red Pony*, *Tortilla Flat*, *In Dubious Battle*, and *Of Mice and Men* are among Steinbeck's greatest achievements. During these early years, Steinbeck also continued to work as a reporter, investigating among other things, the conditions of migratory farm laborers in California. He summarized his conclusions in a series of articles first published as "The Harvest of Gypsies" in the San Francisco News in October 1936, and later reprinted as a pamphlet under the title *Their Blood is Strong*. Steinbeck completed his fictional account of the Dust Bowl migrants during a burst of activity between June and October of 1938, and the novel stands as a masterpiece of world literature.

## Discussion Questions for *The Grapes of Wrath*

1. The structure of *The Grapes of Wrath* includes narrative or “storytelling” chapters as well as brief and more poetic interchapters. Why do you think Steinbeck used this structure? What seems to be the purpose of the interchapters?
2. An important thematic element in the book is the tragic discrepancy between the myth and reality of California. What visions do the characters have of a better life in this Promised Land? How do the realities of California live up to these expectations?
3. Steinbeck once wrote that he intended to “rip” his readers’ nerves “to rags” by making them “participate in the actuality” of his characters’ lives. How well does Steinbeck achieve this intention? Cite specific examples to support your answer?
4. Discuss the origins and expression of the anti-Okie mentality. What kinds of discrimination do the Joads and the other Dust Bowl migrants encounter?
5. Discuss Steinbeck’s treatment of poverty. What changes does poverty affect in the personalities, family structure, and values of the characters?
6. What are the elements of Steinbeck’s critique of the American political and economic system? What sort of revolution does Steinbeck seem to be forecasting? Discuss the radicalization of his characters?
7. Analyze Steinbeck’s development of the theme of unity. Does his vision of unity extend to all mankind (including the California farmers and cops) or is it exclusively a class unity?
8. Some critics have suggested that the key meaning of the book lies in its Biblical and Christian symbolism. Do you agree with this interpretation? Why or why not?
9. When the novel was published in 1939, it was banned in communities in California and elsewhere as “obscene” and as “propaganda.” Why do you think the novel provoked such a negative reaction? Why would some people want to see the novel suppressed?
10. From what you know of the conditions of migratory farm workers in California and the west today, how have conditions changed in the fifty years since *The Grapes of Wrath* was published? If you were to write a novel today about the migrants, what themes would you include?

## The Old Man and the Sea

*The Old Man and the Sea* invites, even demands, reading on multiple levels. For example, readers can receive the novella as an engaging and realistic story of Santiago, the old man; Manolin, the young man who loves him; and Santiago's last and greatest battle with a giant marlin. However, the novella also clearly fits into the category of *allegory* — a story with a surface meaning and one or more under-the-surface meanings. Likewise, the characters become much more than themselves or even types — they become *archetypes* (universal representations inherited from the collective consciousness of our ancestors and the fundamental facts of human existence). From this perspective, Santiago is mentor, spiritual father, old man, or old age; and Manolin is pupil, son, boy, or youth. Santiago is the great fisherman and Manolin his apprentice — both dedicated to fishing as a way of life that they were born to and a calling that is spiritually enriching and part of the organic whole of the natural world. Santiago, as the greatest of such fishermen and the embodiment of their philosophy, becomes a solitary human representative to the natural world. He accepts the inevitability of the natural order, in which all creatures are both predator and prey, but recognizes that all creatures also nourish one another. He accepts the natural cycle of human existence as part of that natural order, but finds within himself the imagination and inspiration to endure his greatest struggle and achieve the intangibles that can redeem his individual life so that even when destroyed he can remain undefeated.

### Author Information

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), born in Oak Park, Illinois, started his career as a writer in a newspaper office in Kansas City at the age of seventeen. After the United States entered the First World War, he joined a volunteer ambulance unit in the Italian army. Serving at the front, he was wounded, was decorated by the Italian Government, and spent considerable time in hospitals. After his return to the United States, he became a reporter for Canadian and American newspapers and was soon sent back to Europe to cover such events as the Greek Revolution. During the twenties, Hemingway became a member of the group of expatriate Americans in Paris, which he described in his first important work, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Equally successful was *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the study of an American ambulance officer's disillusionment in the war and his role as a deserter. Hemingway used his experiences as a reporter during the civil war in Spain as the background for his most ambitious novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Among his later works, the most outstanding is the short novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). His straightforward prose, his spare dialogue, and his predilection for understatement are particularly effective in his short stories, some of which are collected in *Men Without Women* (1927) and *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories* (1938). Hemingway died in Idaho in 1961.

## Discussion Questions for *The Old Man and the Sea*

1. Is this really about an old man and the sea? Or is it about an old man and a fish? Or about an old man and a young boy? Or maybe these are all bound up together. Certainly, the sea and the fish dominate the old man's attention for most of the tale, yet he also says that he likes to go out alone "beyond all the people in the world," but he wishes he had the boy with him. He says, "I told the boy I was a strange old man . . . Now is when I must prove it." What *is* he trying to prove?

2. Speaking of the fish, he says, "He is my brother, but I must kill him." He claims to love the fish, yet he will kill it. Why does this fish mean so much to him? How are they alike? Do you see any parallels between the old man's quest for the fish and Ahab's search for Moby Dick? How are they similar, and how are they different?

3. At one point the old man compares himself to Joe DiMaggio. At another, he recalls an arm wrestling match with a Negro. What's the point? Is this just an instance of an old guy trying to prove his manhood to himself and a young boy? Or is it some sort of spiritual quest? Or possibly both? What if he hadn't caught the fish? Would he have considered himself a failure?

4. During the shark attack, he feels regret about the way things have turned out, but reflects, "'Do not think about sin . . . There are enough problems without sin. Also, I have no understanding of it," and "You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman." To what extent could this internal conversation be seen as a meditation on killing?

5. Although for much of the book, not much happens, the old man is an acute observer of nature. He notices many details of water, lines, birds, clouds, and sea life. Even his thoughts seem to be concrete and image based, rather than abstract and philosophical. The sentences are mostly short and straightforward, the vocabulary lean and spare. The main characters don't even have names. Did you find this narrative style effective? Did it hold your attention throughout?

6. A man, a boy, and a fish, which also appears to be male -- this would certainly appear to be a masculine story, perhaps one that says something about a distinctly male way of being in the world, one that is being passed down from generation to generation. What are the characteristics of this ethos? Is it exclusively masculine, or is it something that women can also relate to?

## To Kill a Mockingbird

The unforgettable novel of a childhood in a sleepy Southern town and the crisis of conscience that rocked it, *To Kill a Mockingbird* became both an instant bestseller and a critical success when it was first published in 1960. It went on to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1961 and was later made into an Academy Award–winning film, also a classic.

Compassionate, dramatic, and deeply moving, *To Kill a Mockingbird* takes the readers to the roots of human behavior—to innocence and experience, kindness and cruelty, love and hatred, humor and pathos. Now with over 18 million copies in print and translated into ten languages, this regional story by a young Alabama woman claims universal appeal. Harper Lee always considered her book to be a simple love story. Today it is regarded as a masterpiece of American literature.

## Author Information

Nelle Harper Lee (born April 28, 1926) is an American novelist widely known for her 1960 Pulitzer Prize–winning *To Kill a Mockingbird* which deals with the racism she observed as a child in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama. Though Lee only published this single book for half a century, she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her contribution to literature. Lee has received numerous honorary degrees, and declined to speak on each occasion. Lee assisted close friend Truman Capote in his research for the book *In Cold Blood* (1966). In February 2015 at age 88, nearly blind and deaf after a 2007 stroke, and after a lifetime of maintaining that she would never publish another novel, Lee released a statement through her attorney that confirmed Lee would publish a second novel, *Go Set a Watchman* (set to be published on July 14, 2015), written before *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

## Discussion Questions for *To Kill a Mockingbird*

1. How do Scout, Jem, and Dill characterize Boo Radley at the beginning of the book? In what way did Boo's past history of violence foreshadow his method of protecting Jem and Scout from Bob Ewell? Does this repetition of aggression make him more or less of a sympathetic character?
2. The title of Lee's book is alluded to when Atticus gives his children air rifles and tells them that they can shoot all the bluejays they want, but "it's a sin to kill a mockingbird." At the end of the novel, Scout likens the "sin" of naming Boo as Bob Ewell's killer to "shootin' a mockingbird." Do you think that Boo is the only innocent, or mockingbird, in this novel?
3. Scout ages two years—from six to eight—over the course of Lee's novel, which is narrated from her perspective as an adult. Did you find the account her narrator provides believable? Were there incidents or observations in the book that seemed unusually "knowing" for such a young child? What event or episode in Scout's story do you feel truly captures her personality?
4. *To Kill a Mockingbird* has been challenged repeatedly by the political left and right, who have sought to remove it from libraries for its portrayal of conflict between children and adults; ungrammatical speech; references to sex, the supernatural, and witchcraft; and unfavorable presentation of blacks. Which elements of the book—if any—do you think touch on controversial issues in our contemporary culture? Did you find any of those elements especially troubling, persuasive, or insightful?
5. Jem describes to Scout the four "folks" or classes of people in Maycomb County: "our kind of folks don't like the Cunninghams, the Cunninghams don't like the Ewells, and the Ewells hate and despise the colored folks." What do you think of the ways in which Lee explores race and class in 1930s Alabama? What significance, if any, do you think these characterizations have for people living in other parts of the world?
6. One of the chief criticisms of *To Kill a Mockingbird* is that the two central storylines—Scout, Jem, and Dill's fascination with Boo Radley and the trial between Mayella Ewell and Tom Robinson—are not sufficiently connected in the novel. Do you think that Lee is successful in incorporating these different stories? Were you surprised at the way in which these story lines were resolved? Why or why not?
7. By the end of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the book's first sentence: "When he was thirteen, my brother Jem got his arm badly broken at the elbow," has been explained and resolved. What did you think of the events that followed the Halloween pageant? Did you think that Bob Ewell was capable of injuring Scout or Jem? How did you feel about Boo Radley's last-minute intervention?
8. What elements of this book did you find especially memorable, humorous, or inspiring? Are there individual characters whose beliefs, acts, or motives especially impressed or surprised you? Did any events in this book cause you to reconsider your childhood memories or experiences in a new light?