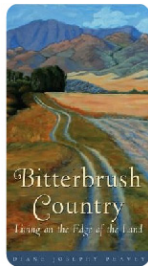


# Living in the Modern Rural West



## Why Am I Reading This?

The contemporary western writers featured in this theme have a variety of perspectives on rural life in the modern West. Ranging in location across the northern rural West from Washington to various regions of Idaho (the largest cluster) to Montana, their books present a realistic portrait of the West, admitting to difficulties and divisions and misery, both personal and familial. Readers will find hard questions and unpleasant truths revealed here, along with wry humor at the quirky nature of life in the region. And yet all of these writers also celebrate the particular Western landscapes that they chronicle, evoking the West's inspirational, restorative power even as they demolish the idea that coming west can solve all problems. The West, they suggest, is still a place where people can "find themselves," although perhaps not in the way that they expected.

***"Living in the Modern Rural West" theme materials were created by Susan Swetnam, Idaho State University, 2007.***

## Book List

- *Bitterbrush Country: Living on the Edge of the Land* by Diane Josephy Peavey
- *Close Range: Wyoming Stories* by Annie Proulx
- *Hole in the Sky: A Memoir*, by William Kittredge
- *Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age* by Susan Swetnam
- *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in an Unknown Country* by Kim Barnes
- *Indian Creek Chronicles*, by Pete Fromm
- *Reservation Blues*, by Sherman Alexie
- *The Sky Fisherman* by Craig Lesley
- *The Solace of Open Spaces*, Gretel Ehrlich
- *This House of Sky*, by Ivan Doig
- *Traplins: Coming Home to the Sawtooth Valley* by John Rember
- *Winter Range* by Claire Davis

# Book Summaries and Discussion Questions

## **Bitterbrush Country: Living on the Edge of the Land**

In this collection of autobiographical essays (originally read on Idaho Public Radio), Diane Josephy Peavey writes about her life as a rancher and environmentalist in (as she puts it) “the vast, open landscape of south-central Idaho, at once a sanctuary, a source of strength, and a heartache.” Funny, lyrical, and profound, these essays describe sheep shearing, rodeos, state fairs, and the comic misadventures of a woman who never expected to be a rancher but has fallen in love with the life and the landscape. The essays also speak to the politics of ranching in the west as they describe the ranchers’ struggles against unfavorable government policy and encroaching development. With complexity, vivid detail, and honesty, Bitterbrush Country’s vignettes bring readers into the daily life of a rancher. Gretel Ehrlich called Peavey’s writing “lucid and charming, full of the stillness and exuberance of the country she so loves and the man who came with it. Lovely from start to finish.”

## **Author Information**

Daughter of noted historian of American Indians Alvin Josephy, Jr., Diane Josephy Peavey spent summers in Joseph, Oregon, although she grew up in the East. After working on the Alaska Lands legislation in Washington D.C. in the late 1970s, then serving as a special assistant at the department of the Interior in Washington, she married Idaho state senator John Peavey, a third-generation owner of a sheep and cattle operation, Flat Top Sheep Company, north of Carey Idaho at the end of a 24-mile dirt road. She has served as Director of the Idaho Rural Council, Literature Director of the Idaho Commission on the Arts, and a correspondent for Idaho Public Radio. She is organizer of the annual Trailing of the Sheep Festival in Ketchum, Idaho. She lives with her family at Flat Top Sheep Company.

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## **Discussion Questions for Bitterbrush Country**

1. Popular stereotypes would suggest that the terms “rancher” and “environmentalist” are incompatible. How does Peavey blend the two in her perspective? Do you see how they can have common aims?
2. “Pain and loss,” Bitterbrush Country asserts, “are the constant counterpoint to this beautiful landscape.” What sorts of pain besides the physical does Peavey document in her work? What sorts of loss? What are the compensations?
3. What specific human-caused problems make ranchers’ lives difficult, according to Peavey? Does she offer solutions? Are these problems solvable, do you think?
4. As a transplant, what aspects of the rural western landscape most impress Peavey? Why? Do you see her defining herself in terms of landscape?
5. What are rural westerners like, according to the vignettes in this book? Do you agree?
6. 6. What functions does humor serve in this book? Pick a few places where comedy and a more serious tone are juxtaposed, and discuss how the shift works.
7. Compare Peavey’s perspective as a transplant to the west with John Rember’s perspective on a similar landscape as a native. How are they different? Similar?

## Close Range: Wyoming Stories

Close Range collects eleven short stories set in rural Wyoming, including two O. Henry Prize winners for the year's best short story, "Brokeback Mountain" and "The Mud Below" (both of which originally appeared in The New Yorker), and another ("The Half-Skinned Steer") which was chosen for The Best American Short Stories 1998 and The Best American Short Stories of the Century (1999). Proulx's characters are memorable: lonely, stubborn, violent, and usually down-on-their luck, full of yearning. On ranches and in small towns, on the rodeo circuit and in bars and menial jobs, they look for love, for stability, for something to give their lives meaning, but their fates play out darkly, in most cases. The huge empty landscape of Wyoming is a vivid presence in this book, the stage for great and small human tragedies. The stories are full of vivid, gritty details about contemporary western life; of their style, one reviewer said, "every single sentence surprises and delights and just bowls you over."

## Author Information

(Edna) Annie Proulx was nearly 60 years old when her second novel, *The Shipping News*, won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the National Book Award for fiction in 1994. She was born in 1935 in Connecticut to parents of French-Canadian ancestry, was educated at Colby College and Sir George Williams University (now Concordia University) in Montreal. She began her career as a journalist, then began publishing stories in the 1970s and 1980s. After her first novel appeared, in 1992, she was awarded NEA and Guggenheim fellowships. She has won many prizes for her work (including The New Yorker Book Award Best Fiction 1999 for *Close Range*); "Brokeback Mountain" was made into a movie in 2005 and was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning three. She is divorced and has three children. She has lived in Wyoming since 1994, spending part of the year in Newfoundland.

## Discussion Questions for Close Range

1. Most of these characters' lives are unhappy. How much effect do factors beyond their control play in their fates: their upbringing, their class, their luck? How much of their suffering is their own fault? Could some of these stories have ended differently?
2. What role does the Wyoming landscape play here, as agent in the stories and as symbol? Is this a specifically "Wyoming," or "western" book, or could these people live in any rural area?
3. Compare the women characters with the men. Do the women seem any more, or less resilient? Self-directed? Self-destructive? The majority of these stories have male lead characters, vs. female, though Proulx is a woman. Does that seem significant or appropriate in some way to you?
4. What makes these characters tick? What motivates them, what do they want, what do they fear? Are they universal in these respects, or particularly "western" in some way?
5. Do you feel empathy for these characters? Why or why not?
6. Which of these stories seem particularly well-constructed as stories to you, in terms of plot, character, style, etc.? What is it about these stories that made them so critically admired, do you think?
7. One reviewer noted that the stories don't simply repeat each other, but afford subtle mood changes, playing the themes out "in eleven different keys." Do you agree? What are those overarching themes, and how do individual stories build and expand them?

## 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, 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?
4. In the best memoirs, the writers take risks, particularly with how they present (or re-present) 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?

## Home Mountains: Reflections From a Western Middle Age

After a youth spent in the East in quiet discontent, Susan Swetnam writes about the middle-age surprise of finding herself at home in southeastern Idaho. The book's autobiographical essays chronicle her attempts to come to terms with various "homes"—with the beautiful expanses and sometimes quirky occupants of the Intermountain West, but also with life choices, with family, with love, with responsibility, and with the need to keep adapting to life's ongoing changes. Essay topics range from the surprise of winning a blue ribbon at the Eastern Idaho State Fair, to mountain rambling, to fighting fires, to accepting the blessings of a love which can only be temporary. Youth is hardly the apex of life, Swetnam concludes; middle age, too, can be a time of deep satisfaction, a time of dawning self-realization. Home Mountains was honored by the Idaho Library Association in 2000.

### Author Information

Susan Swetnam was born in Philadelphia in 1950 and educated at the University of Delaware and the University of Michigan. She came to Idaho in 1979 to teach at Idaho State University. A professor of English and a writer, she has published essays and articles in a wide variety of national, regional, and literary magazines, including *Gourmet*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Black Canyon Quarterly*. She won a writer's residency from Washington State's Espy Foundation in 2004. In addition to *Home Mountains*, she has published book-length studies of Mormon pioneer life story writing and of Idaho writer Grace Jordan, as well as a collection of personal essays about teaching (*My Best Teachers Were Saints*, 2006). She has been active in public humanities programming in Idaho, including Let's Talk About It programs for more than twenty years, as was her late husband, poet Ford Swetnam.

### Discussion Questions for Home Mountains

1. What does Swetnam see in the landscape of southeast Idaho that helps her define herself?
2. Some of this book's essays are retrospective, looking back at periods when the writer had not yet discovered Idaho. How do they fit into the book's overall themes?
3. The book's first essay, "On Entering the Eastern Idaho State Fair," concludes "and I am home." And yet that essay has shown that the writer still recognizes herself as an outsider in the human landscape of the Fair. In what sense, then, is she "home?"
4. Though a few of the essays in this book are about family, this book suggests that Swetnam is more disengaged from birth family than many writers in this series. What constitutes "family" for her? How can a person be "home" in a place if no blood relations live there?
5. Which of these essays round and complicate conventional pictures of the West and Westerners? Which would confirm such pictures?
6. How does the perspective that an immigrant like Swetnam brings to a place differ from the perspective of a native? Does one necessarily see a place differently, or better, than another?
6. In the introduction, Swetnam writes that "middle age . . . is about finding the sort of grounding that makes living possible." What sorts of "grounding" does the book suggest that she's found? Do you agree that middle age is an especially fruitful time for self-definition?
7. With all the references to "home" in this essay collection, how does the title make a fitting pairing? Give examples.

## **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?



## Indian Creek Chronicles

Named a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Book of the Year when it was published, Pete Fromm's account of his seven months in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness of the Idaho panhandle reads at times like the story of the mountain man he played at being when he signed up to keep watch over a couple of million salmon eggs at the remote hatchery. When Fromm came to the University of Montana from his native Wisconsin to major in wildlife biology and to participate on the swimming team, his roommate, who had worked as a seasonal ranger, introduced him to books like A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Big Sky*, and before he knew it, Fromm fell in love with the mystique of Jim Bridger and Jeremiah Johnson. At age twenty, he accepted a job with Idaho Fish and Game on the very "romantic whim" the warden warns against, but he soon proves himself a capable outdoorsman. Fromm splices his narrative, which reads much like a novel, with self-deprecating humor, but in fact, he proves equal to the challenges of isolation and intense cold. He turns out to be an excellent shot, supplementing his diet with rabbit, grouse, and finally an illegally bagged moose. About midway through the book Fromm observes a mountain lion hunt led by a group of outfitters, and in that context we detect some misgivings about his mountain man values, but generally he does not confront the issues. That matter is left to the reader. And in this respect, Fromm's book varies considerably from Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*, to which it relates as something of an anti-type.

## Author Information

Born in 1958 and raised in Shorewood, Wisconsin, Pete Fromm majored in wildlife biology at the University of Montana, where he attended on a swimming scholarship, graduating with honors in 1981. He worked for several years as a seasonal ranger for the National Park Service. An avid reader, Fromm says in an interview (2001) that he stumbled into a couple of creative writing courses while at UM and began writing full-time in 1990 after his first publication. Attracted to Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, Fromm notes that he was struck by "the stunningly literate line," "Nick liked to open cans." His wife, Rose Powers, is a mechanical engineer. His first book, *Tall Uncut* (1992), was a collection of short stories about "hunting and fishing, of long car trips through open landscape." Most of his subsequent books have been collections of short stories usually involving the out-of-doors, including *King of the Mountain* (1994), *Dry Rain* (1997), *Blood Knot* (1998), and *Night Swimming* (2000). Two of his recent novels, however, have drawn particular attention. *How All This Started* (2000) joined *Indian Creek Chronicles* as a winner of the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association award, and *As Cool as I Am* (2003), a coming-of-age novel set in Great Falls, Montana, where Fromm currently lives, has been praised as a "beautiful and evocative" tale of young womanhood narrated in a voice that is "provocative, gritty, erotic, hilarious and genuine."



## Discussion Questions for Indian Creek Chronicles

1. Described by the publishers as “a rousing tale of self-sufficiency” and “a modern-day *Walden*,” *Indian Creek Chronicles* may strike you as neither of the above. He is given provisions, after all, and the connections with Thoreau’s classic may be more contrastive than comparative. The fame of Thoreau’s classic resides in his insights and meditations. When do we see what is on young Fromm’s mind? Does he strike you as being very thoughtful at all? Do you think we as readers are expected to criticize or judge his behavior?
2. The subtitle of this book is “A Winter Alone in the Wilderness,” but Pete Fromm often appears beleaguered by wardens checking up on him, outfitters and hunters, and college chums. Moreover, he has the companionship of his “little rat-like dog” Boone. So how “alone” is the narrator? How does he handle his sense of isolation? What role is played by the books his parents and sister send with him?
3. What problems does Fromm have to confront when it comes to his romantic fantasy of living like a mountain man? He succeeds in trapping a snowshoe hare, for example, but then what? How does the moose he kills fit in here? Why does he show himself thinking of it as poaching in the context of the mountain lion hunt (112)?
4. If Gretel Ehrlich’s memoir *The Solace of Open Spaces* is “gendered female,” Pete Fromm’s is surely “gendered male.” What similarities and differences do you detect in these encounters with nature? Does either strike you as likely to appeal exclusively to one set of readers rather than another? Put another way, do you think men are more likely to enjoy Gretel Ehrlich than women are to enjoy Pete Fromm?
5. What does Pete Fromm learn from his months in the wilderness about how humans should relate to the natural world? Does he make these lessons explicit, or are we as readers expected to read between the lines of what appears to be mostly an adventure story? What are we to make, for example, of the deer and bobcat episode in Chapter Sixteen?
6. After carefully reviewing the final chapter (and the epilogue) of this book, what are your thoughts? What range of images, events, and people does Fromm leave us with? Why does he leave his dog with the bear hunters? His job guarding the salmon eggs connects Fromm with an important role in conservation, but how aware of that has he been throughout his stay?
7. The theme essay cites Wendell Berry, who argues that our biological as well as our cultural roots are in nature. Could you make the case that Fromm’s book supports the notion that our cultural roots are found in nature? Where do you see evidence of that in *Chronicles*?
8. What are the key concerns of this particular community regarding clean air and water, land use, declining species, and other issues?
9. Did the concept of a land ethic enter into young Fromm’s decision to go to Indian Creek? How do his experiences change him and his view of the natural world?
10. What other changes do we see in Fromm over the course of his sojourn?
11. How did the author’s self-deprecating humor affect this story and your response to it?

## Reservation Blues

To read about Native American reservation life is usually to read about illness and despair. Fiction originating from that life is also, of course, capable of wild happiness and celebration; but the darkness is a fact of life and art. James Welch, in his superb novel “Winter in the Blood,” observes his characters’ suffering from the corner of his narrative eye; Reynolds Price, in his moving novella “Walking Lessons,” confronts the sorrow directly. Sherman Alexie, whose 1993 collection, “The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven,” was justly applauded, writes about characters who are squarely in the middle of reservation life but who report it to us from a point of view that is simultaneously tangential to the mainstream of that life as well as part of its sad, slow rhythms. Here, for example, from his first novel, “Reservation Blues,” is Mr. Alexie’s description of the Indians’ mythic coyote: “a trickster whose bag of tricks contains permutations of love, hate, weather, chance, laughter and tears, e.g., Lucille Ball.” He catches the ancient and the contemporary, the solemn and the self-mocking, at once; he evokes dreary days of watching black-and-white television reruns in a place of “poverty, suicide, alcoholism,” where “Indian Health only gave out dental floss and condoms.” When Mr. Alexie writes at his best, he creates stinging commentary, and he shows his determination to make you uncertain whether you want to laugh or cry.

## Author Information

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d’Alene Indian, was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He received his B.A. in American studies from Washington State University in Pullman. His books of poetry include *Face* (Hanging Loose, 2009), *One Stick Song* (2000), *The Man Who Loves Salmon* (1998), *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), *Water Flowing Home* (1995), *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *I Would Steal Horses* (1992), and *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992). He is also the author of several novels and collections of short fiction including *Flight* (Grove Press, 2007); *Ten Little Indians* (2003); *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000); *Indian Killer* (1996); *Reservation Blues* (1994), which won the Before Columbus Foundation’s American Book Award; and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which received a Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Alexie and Chris Eyre wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals*, which was based on Alexie’s short story, *This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona*. The movie won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998.

## Discussion Questions for Reservation Blues

1. This is a book about (among many other things) stereotypes. What are some of these: for example, think about Father Arnold when he first came to the reservation, the Seattle radio station interview with Thomas about religion, Betty and Veronica, Calvary Records, and bars in New York City.
2. What do you think of the magical and supernatural elements of the novel? And what about the element of dreams—present in one way or another on almost every page?
3. And what about the chronology of the narrative, the order in which events are presented? (Especially in Chapter 9)
4. What do the poems that begin the chapters add to the impact of the novel? Of these, do you have a favorite poem?
5. Thomas Builds-the-Fire is a storyteller. Storytelling is obviously a major part of Native American culture. What kinds of stories does Thomas tell? How do his contemporaries on the reservation respond to them?
6. Alcoholism is a major problem and theme of the novel. Of the characters, which ones especially have—or have had—this problem? Who have not?
7. *Reservation Blues* has a distinctive kind of humor. Did it make you laugh a lot?
8. What are Thomas's feelings about the United States government? (See especially pp. 154-55.)
9. The themes of fatalism and free choice are prominent in the book. What kind of statement does this book make about these two attitudes toward life?
10. Do you think this book presents men fairly? Women?
11. Whatever label we give *Reservation Blues*, it certainly has *historical* dimensions. Of course, the entire history of Indian/white relations is involved, and the "Indian wars" from the 1850s through the 1890s, as well as the specific history of the Spokane Reservation. Then there's Robert Johnson and the history of blues and rock music. What historical elements that you know about are especially useful in reading the book? What more would you like to know about history related to it?

## The Sky Fisherman

The Sky Fisherman is a boy's coming of age story, set in a Northwest river town; it is full of drama, river and fishing stories, rural humor, and American Indian lore. The main character, Culver, lives with his widowed mother; his father drowned in a boating accident while on the fabled Lost River with his Uncle Jake, a guide. As the novel begins, Culver's mother is shedding her feckless arsonist second husband to return to the town where Jake lives; the guide becomes Culver's surrogate father. After a young Indian man's apparent drowning is revealed to be murder and a terrible fire threatens to engulf the entire town, Culver's world grows darker, and secrets about race relations, betrayals, and Uncle Jake's own past end his innocence. During a dramatic flood, Culver comes to understand forgiveness and gains the healing that he needs to survive.

## Author Information

Craig Lesley earned a B. A. from Whitman College and M.A. at the University of Kansas and settled in Portland, Oregon in 1970 to teach English and creative writing at Clackamas Community College. With the help of a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship, he earned his MFA at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. His first novel, *Winterkill*, the story of a Native American rodeo rider, was published in 1984 by Houghton Mifflin. His second, *River Song*, is a sequel. *The Sky Fisherman*, Lesley's third novel, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize. He calls it his favorite novel. Lesley's fourth novel, *Storm Riders*, won an Oregon Book Award and is based on the true story of Lesley's family's attempt to help a young Indian boy damaged by fetal alcohol syndrome and abandoned by his parents. Lesley has also edited two anthologies of short stories and has published his own stories in various little and literary magazines. He has served as the chair of creative writing at Willamette University and as Writer in Residence at Whitman College and Portland State University. He lives with his wife and daughters in Portland.

## Discussion Questions for The Sky Fisherman

1. Culver has mixed feelings about his mother throughout the book. How are those typical of the ones that any boy of his age might have, and how are they distinctive to his family situation?
2. How does living near Jake change his life? Do you see him copying Jake as a role model? How?
3. What symbolic role(s) does the river play in the book? Is it distinctive enough to be called a "character?" Does what you decide help explain why Jake feels so at home there?
4. How does the book depict Native Americans? Does the portrait seem fair and rounded to you? What does their presence add to the narrative?
5. The novel has a great deal to say about how men in the rural west relate to each other. What assumptions and values seem to govern these interactions? Is there a "code of the rural west" implied in this book?
6. Lesley uses the archetypes of fire and water liberally in this book. What do those add to the narrative? Do you like the use of them?
7. What does Culver learn about life by the novel's end? Has he matured, do you think? What do you make of the ending, where he looks up into the sky and imagines his family there, saving a place for him?

## The Solace of Open Spaces

In his famous canonical poem, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” William Wordsworth expressed his confidence in the healing powers of nature. But the scenery on the banks of the river Wye in 1798 appears to have been far more attractive than that of north central Wyoming where, during the six-month long winters, Gretel Ehrlich observes on the opening page, “The landscape hardens into a dungeon of space.” Yet as the title of the book indicates, she found “solace” in the wind-swept landscape near the Big Horn Mountains when she arrived in 1976 to shoot a film. After the death of her Welsh lover, Ehrlich returned to Wyoming to grieve and to rebuild her life. In the dozen essays that constitute this short book, Ehrlich reflects on the toughness it takes to live in the harsh solitude, some of which she experiences by going on drives with sheep herders. “Living with animals,” Ehrlich writes in reference not only to sheep and cows, but also to horses and dogs, “makes us redefine our ideas about intelligence” (64). More than most other writers in this series, Ehrlich balances her attention between the landscape and the people she meets, and she recounts her courtship with Press Stephens, who ran a small sheep ranch and to whom she was briefly married. Throughout the book we are aware of Ehrlich’s powers as the poet of this “unaccountably libidinous place.” For some readers, however, the most appealing moments may be those that appear in the form of aphorisms, the vulnerable (because they are so naked and open to attack), epigrammatic assertions that dominate the title essay; for example, “In all this open space, values crystallize quickly” (10). To the extent that this book amounts to a “gendered” account, it bears comparison (and notably, contrast) with Pete Fromm’s *Indian Creek Chronicles*.

## Author Information

Born in 1946 on a horse ranch near Santa Barbara, California, Gretel Ehrlich attended Bennington College and took courses at the UCLA Film School and at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She has been twice married and divorced. Her first two books were collections of poetry published by small presses, but the publication of *The Solace of Open Spaces* in 1985 brought her writing to the attention of a broad audience. Her nonfiction has been published in such anthologies as *Best American Essays*, *Best Spiritual Writing*, and *The Nature Reader*. Her novel, *Heart Mountain*, centered on the Japanese internment camp in Wyoming during World War II, appeared in 1987 and was praised for its “beautifully crafted prose.” In 1991 Ehrlich was struck by lightning while at her ranch in Wyoming and was severely injured. While undergoing treatment in California, she worked on *A Match to the Heart* (1994), which deals with her struggle toward full recovery. Since then, Ehrlich has traveled and written extensively. Gretel Ehrlich is currently at work on a new novel. She divides her time between California and Wyoming.

## Discussion Questions *The Solace of Open Spaces*

1. The West has evolved, some might say, into the kind of place Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces* has implied it would: a place of solace, healing, and retirement. What do you consider to be the up and down sides of that state of affairs, assuming you agree with the premise? What contributions, if any, do you suppose have been made by this sort of book, or by books like Ivan Doig's memoir, *This House of Sky* (1978), or Mark Spragg's *Where Rivers Change Direction* (1999)? Do you think the West, particularly the northern Rockies area, represents the last chance in the U.S. for people to deal wisely with the earth?
2. In the twenty years that have passed since the publication of Ehrlich's essays, Wyoming has been opened to increased development of various minerals, coal, and oil and gas. Does her lack of reference to that phenomenon compromise the value of this book? How do we balance this sort of well-written personal (perhaps "literary") response to place with the more fact-driven journalistic accounts that are driven by a clear premise or agenda?
3. Ehrlich's essays on Wyoming have been described as sensuous to the point of being sexual or erotic (note, for example, the last two or three pages). In fact, her own romantic relationships become part of the story in this book. Does this make the essays more appealing to you, or do you think she becomes too intimate, too personal, in her approach?
4. Connected with #3, does Ehrlich's approach seem to you to be distinctly "feminine," and if so, do you consider that to be problematic? One commentator has written, "Her desire to blur boundaries between self/body and the natural world is timely and of interest to critics." Do you think it is better to regard nature as an extension of self, or as "other"?
5. Ehrlich's connection with Wyoming may be more personal, even psychological, than environmental. She does not promote herself as a naturalist or ecologist. So why would we include this book in our examination of this theme? Does she advance any ethical view here, directly or indirectly? What are her most important and valid thoughts about open space?
6. Examine a few of the aphoristic one-liners in this book, like "The solitude in which westerners live makes them quiet" (6) or "Everything in nature invites us constantly to be what we are" (84). The title essay runs rife with them. Are some of these quotable assertions, for a variety of reasons, becoming less valid now than they once were?

## 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)?

## **Traplines: Coming Home to the Sawtooth Valley**

In this memoir, John Rember recounts his experiences of growing up in the Sawtooth Valley at a time when fish were wild in the rivers and electric light seemed magical. His father was a trapper/fishing guide, and everyone in his family—including his mother—hunted. After he moved back home as an adult in 1987, Rember realizes that those same experiences no longer seem to possess the authenticity that they once did. The rural West, he discovers, has been transformed, both as a place to live and as a terrain of the imagination. Funny, beautiful, and philosophical, this book weaves memories and reflections into an anecdotal narrative which displays deep affection for place and family. Not only has the place where he grew up changed, he realizes, but he has, too. Reviewers called *Traplines* “a requiem, of sorts, for one of the last best places,” a “voyage to self-consciousness,” and “a captivating and contemplative look at how we have evolved our communities in the rural West.”

### **Author Information**

John Rember is a fourth-generation Idahoan who was born in Sun Valley and grew up in the Sawtooth Valley. His mother was a nurse, his father drove a ski bus and worked as a miner, fishing and hunting guide, trapper, and mechanic. Rember was educated at Harvard and earned an MFA at the University of Montana. He has written numerous articles, stories, and essays for publications ranging from *Travel and Leisure* to *Skiing Magazine* to *Wilderness Conservation*, and his work has been often anthologized. In addition to *Traplines* (which was named Idaho Book of the Year in 2004 by the Idaho Library Association), he has published two short story collections, *Cheerleaders from Gomorrah: Tales from the Lycra Archipelago*, and *Coyote in the Mountains*. He is Writer-in-Residence at Albertson College of Idaho and teaches in the Pacific University MFA program in Forest Grove, Oregon. He lives in the Sawtooth Valley with his wife. His website is [www.johnremember.com](http://www.johnremember.com).

## Discussion Questions for *Traplines*

1. In *Traplines*' first essay, John Rember considers what it means to go "home" to a place that looks like itself but has changed. Even as he calls the new Sawtooth Valley a "museum," he clearly feels "at home" there. Why? What is the same for him, despite all the changes? What makes a place "home?"
2. In what ways were the young Rember's values and attitudes shaped by his rural western upbringing (both by absorbing his family's values and reacting against them)?
3. Why did the narrator need to get away from his roots?
4. What was made available to him upon his leaving? His returning?
5. The book's world is full of people who keep their own company, including the narrator himself (in the essay titled "Solo" and elsewhere). What draws them to solitude? Does the quality of their solitude seem somehow "western" to you?
6. What does it mean to be a "local" in this book? Is this simply an exclusive insider's designation, or do the outsiders in the book seem substantially different in the way that they approach life?
7. Why does he include the episode with the mule Festus? What is he teaching us?
8. "Stories are artifice," Rember writes, even as he tells the story of his life. Why, then, tell a story like this?
9. "There is no continuity of self through time . . . but there is continuity of love through time," the book concludes. What does this mean in the context of the narrative? Do you agree?
10. Why is the book called "*Traplines*?" What connotations does the title hold?
11. Why did the narrator need to get away from his roots?
12. What was made available to him upon his leaving? His returning?
13. Why does he include the episode with the male festus? What is he teaching us?
14. Why the title? What connotations does the title hold?

## Winter Range

Winter Range, a dark and haunting novel, is set in the cattle-ranching country of north-eastern Montana. Touching on issues of class and isolation, it traces a winter that turns violent when Ike Parsons, a recent immigrant to the region and town sheriff, attempts to help Chas Stubblefield, a cattleman down on his luck and crazed with loneliness and resentment. Ike's own wife Pattiann, the sheriff discovers, was once a wild young woman who kept company with Chas, and she is drawn once again to reach out to Chas. Believing that he has been betrayed by bankers, filled with angry memories of his abusive father, furious at others whose lives appear to be contented, Chas is in the process of killing his own cattle as the novel begins. By the end, he will have killed more than livestock. Winter Range won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association prize for Best First Novel in 2001.

## Author Information

Claire Davis has told an interviewer that she was an avid reader who began writing stories as soon as she could write, continuing the lives of characters because she could not bear to see books end. She was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, then lived as a young married woman on a small farm outside Milwaukee. In her thirties, she returned to writing. She earned a degree from the writing program at the University of Montana in the early 1990s and now teaches at Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho. Her work has appeared in many literary magazines, including the Southern Review and the Gettysburg Review, and her stories have appeared in Pushcart anthologies. In addition to Winter Range, she is also the author of another novel, Skin of the Snake (2005), and a collection of short stories, Labors of the Heart (2006).

## Discussion Questions for Winter Range

1. Though Ike is well-liked and holds an important office in town, he is still an outsider. What does "outsider" mean in a small western town like this story's setting? What are the disadvantages of being an outsider? Any advantages?
2. What motives Chas to let his cattle starve, or to shoot them? How do the roots of his actions stretch back into his childhood, in addition to the more recent developments that he cites? Do you have any compassion for him?
3. Why was Pattiann so angry in her youth? Why might she have married Ike? Toward the novel's end, she asserts that she is now happy with her life. Do you believe her? If so, why does she reach out to Chas?
4. Davis once agreed with an interviewer that Winter Range is "a story of community." What sorts of communities do you see here (human and beyond), and what conclusions does the novel suggest, if any, about how communities operate, or should operate?
5. How does the harsh winter landscape function in the novel, both practically and metaphorically?
6. In what ways is this a novel about social class? About belonging or not belonging?
7. Winter Range ends darkly. How do you interpret what happens? Does it suggest anything more general about what it's like to live in the modern rural west? Do you agree?