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Crooked River Burning by Mark Winegardner

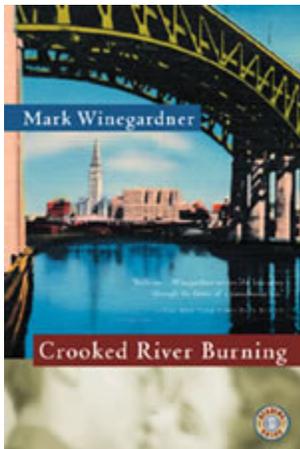
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Crooked River Burning

Mark Winegardner

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About the book:



The critically acclaimed novel of a compelling love affair and the decline of a once prosperous city.

The birthplace of rock 'n' roll, Cleveland was an economic powerhouse and America's sixth-largest city in the late 1940s. By 1969, it had dropped to twelfth. In the summer of 1948, fourteen-year-old David Zielinsky can look forward to a job at the docks, the only way to make a living on his side of the city. Across the river is twelve-year-old Anne O'Connor, daughter of the reigning political boss of Cuyahoga County. In this richly entertaining novel, the two will meet and fall in love, and for twenty turbulent years, as Cleveland falls from grace, they will be consumed by a fiery, star-crossed romance. A natural-born storyteller, Mark Winegardner charts the demise of this fascinating city, artfully weaving in such real-life Clevelanders as Eliot Ness, Alan Freed, and Carl Stokes. A saga reminiscent of the best writing of E. L. Doctorow, Tom Wolfe, and John Dos Passos, *Crooked River Burning* is masterfully crafted and vastly entertaining—a great American novel in the truest sense.

About the author:

Mark Winegardner is the author of the novel *The Veracruz Blues* and three books of nonfiction. A regular contributor to *GQ*, he has also published work in the *New York Times Magazine*, *Playboy*, *Esquire*, *Ploughshares*, *TriQuarterly*, *Doubletake*, and other magazines. He is a professor of English and director of the Creative Writing Program at Florida State University in Tallahassee, where he lives with his wife and

daughter.

Discussion Questions:

Q. The first chapter of a novel often acts as a rulebook for the reader, establishing character, tone, point-of-view, setting, thematic interests, and other narrative choices. What does Mark Winegardner establish in the opening chapter of *Crooked River Burning*? Are any of these “rules” broken later?

Q. Early in the novel, the narrator asks, “How much of history–personal, national, cultural–does happen by whim and accident?” (p. 15) What is the novel’s answer to this question? Based on personal experience, what is your own answer?

Q. In the Alan Freed chapter “Blues for the Moondog”, the narrator states: “Later, you will tell this story and therefore lie (the essential truth of storytelling, even if you stick to the facts: especially then).” (p. 46) What does this mean? How does the novel bear this idea out within its narrative?

Q. In the third Local Heroes chapter, “The Anchorwoman’s Tale,” the narrator asks if Dorothy Fuldheim’s fame remained local because she turned down an offer to go to New York. What is your answer to the narrator’s posed question? New York, as idea and place, is a running reference in the novel. What role does it play? Is New York portrayed as villain or something more complex?

Q. Each Local Hero chapter builds on the narrative techniques employed in the previous installment. As the book progresses, the voice, tone, use of footnotes, acknowledgment of myths, and even the tense change, morph and become more complicated, deeper, and multilayered. What does this strategy achieve?

Q. How are David and Anne products of both their times and environments? In what ways do they singularly distinguish themselves from others of their generation? How do the arcs of David and Anne’s stories, both individually and merged, reflect the arc of Cleveland’s story? Do the highs or lows of their lives coincide with or diverge from the highs and lows of the larger social climate?

Q. *Crooked River Burning* employs both old–fashioned storytelling and new–fangled narrative techniques. How does the novel weld the best of the nineteenth–century novel (Dickens, Tolstoy, George Eliot, and so on) with the wry voice of contemporary literature?

Q. In the Louie Seltzer Local Heroes chapter, the narrator poses this question: “If this wasn’t what people wanted–a populist, crusading paper that asked the questions they wanted answered, that had the courage and the power to seek results, to get results–then why did your circulation skyrocket?” (p. 415) Is this an ironic or heartfelt question? How do a city’s newspapers reflect or change its citizen’s opinions? Does the term “local hero” carry the same connotation for Louie

Seltzer as it does for Alan Freed, Dorothy Fuldheim, or Carl Stokes?

Q. The culmination of many ideas raised about urban politics, as well as the coming together of several narratives, occurs in the chapter, “How to Get Elected by White People.” Does this chapter also contain the climax of the novel itself? Why or why not?

Q. Give examples of how baseball, that hallowed all-American sport, is used to comment on both the macrocosm of America and the microcosm of the specific city in which Crooked River Burning is set.

Q. Are David and Anne local heroes? In literary tradition, a hero is presumed to have a tragic flaw that results in his or her downfall. Does David or Anne have such a flaw?

Q. The author uses the narrative voice to contextualize the past. For example, in describing the Cleveland Indians mascot, Chief Wahoo, in the late forties, the narrator says, “Political correctness will not arrive for forty years. You think Chief Wahoo is bad now, get a load of the vicious, big-nosed red-faced thing they used in the '40s.” (p. 26) What are these asides trying to accomplish? Are they effective?

Q. Through highly personalized stories, the novel continually returns to the relationship between black and white Clevelanders, which is tentative, segregated, and for the most part quiet—until the riots in Hough. Explore the ways in which Crooked River Burning portrays the changing face of race relations, both in Cleveland and throughout the country.

Q. Our circles of community begin with family and extend outward in rings to include neighborhood, city, region, and so forth. How do elements in this first ring—family—determine David’s and Anne’s relationships to the outer rings of the world, both in terms of the families into which they are born as well as, in David’s case, the families they chose to create?

Q. What does the novel tell us about the imperfections of the American dream? About idealism? About the American cult of personality? Although the novel is set in Cleveland, and its events could not happen anywhere but in that metropolis on the North Coast of the country, its themes are universal. How does the novel transcend its boundaries to become a story about the Midwest, a story about America, a story about love?

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