








## READING GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. The prologue describes the geography of the region in which *Driftless* takes place, and the novel's title is taken from the name of the area. How does the Driftless Region, which Rhodes describes as "singularly unrefined . . . in its hilly, primitive form," influence the events of the book?
2. Words, Wisconsin, is a tiny town, not even located on maps of the region. How important is the rural setting of *Driftless*? How would the book be different if it were set in a city, or even in nearby Grange?
3. In many ways, *Driftless* seems to be a novel of oppositions—between the dairy corporation and the farmers, the Amish and the other residents, or a caregiver and a caretaker. What are some of the other oppositions in the book?
4. When July first arrives on the outskirts of Words, he observes that "the dead forever change the living." How does this assertion relate to July's experience? Is a statement like this more true in a small town like Words?
5. During Winnie's epiphany, she realizes that "boundaries did not exist. Where she left off and something else began could not be established." Is this notion and/or experience of unity displayed elsewhere in the book?

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6. Early in the book, Winnie is told that “religion is irrelevant to the modern world.” Do you agree? In this book, is religion a source for wisdom, naïveté, or a combination of the two?
7. Both Winnie and Gail are described as being “chosen”—Winnie through her epiphany; Gail because of the song she writes. What does the parallel between these two characters tell you about them? Are there other characters who are similarly paired?
8. *Driftless* is a collection of stories from many different characters. Do you think any one of the characters is particularly important or central? What is the effect of having many speakers narrate the story?
9. Gram is forced to trust Cora’s instincts when they lose their children in the snowstorm. In what way does that decision influence the rest of their story? Are there other characters who must trust in something beyond their control?
10. Words is described as a town “attached more firmly to the past than to the present.” Some of the inhabitants of Words do seem firmly rooted in their history, but many of them also seem to be escaping their past. What role does the past play in *Driftless*?
11. Words, Wisconsin, is said to be named for Elias Words, the explorer who founded the town. Yet the name Words may also be metaphorical. What role does language play in the book? Which characters are good with words, and which are not? How does this affect their stories?
12. Rusty’s attitudes toward the Amish seem out of line with his own neighbors’ attitudes. Are his concerns justified? If Rusty’s attitude has changed by the end of the novel, to what would you attribute that change?

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13. In this book, corporations seem to be corrupt, and the government is little help. The most radical response to this problem is Moe Ridge's militia. His speech at the end of the book convinces some, but not all, of the characters to join his cause. What do you think of Moe?
  14. The cougar July spots at the beginning of the book is an unfamiliar presence to the residents of Words. Are there other external forces facing Words? What do you think the future holds for the town?
  15. After his death, revelations about July lead some of his friends to suspect that they didn't really know him, and yet a number of characters considered July a good friend. In retrospect, was July a good friend to the other characters in the novel?



## Q & A WITH DAVID RHODES

1. How long have you been writing? Why did you start writing?

I've been writing since about the age of fourteen. Somewhere around that time I discovered that herding words into stories often gave rise to strangely satisfying states of mind—agitated, but satisfying. Maybe I was a little like a herding dog. That first glimpse of a pasture with bunched-together sheep had a different effect upon me than, say, a companion dog that looks at the same pasture and thinks, "Sheep, who cares?" As individuals we seek out activities we can lose ourselves in, and those activities, paradoxically, reveal things we couldn't otherwise know about ourselves.

2. This is your first book in thirty years. How did the accident affect your writing?

*Driftless* was my first *published* work in thirty years. I resumed writing within three or four years after the accident, but the results were dismal. I think serious physical injuries necessarily involve a hornet's nest of psychological problems and at least for me it was hard to begin again where I'd left off. All my equilibriums were disturbed. I didn't know myself any more, unconnected to the embroidered chain of memories and relationships that had earlier defined me. The activity of writing helped me work through this disjunction, though the end product of much of that work remained too dark and dimly focused for general consumption.

3. What draws you to rural life, both personally and in your work?

For me, rural life offers ample qualities of space. Wherever you look are unbounded areas of tumultuous nature, set against ever-expanding vistas of sky. In fiction, this vast roominess offers the psychological space needed for characters to explore their feelings, motivations, and sorrows, lending a depth that might not otherwise be available. As noted in the old fables of the country mouse and city mouse, the city has many wonderful and exciting things to offer, but for nurture, healing, and careful thought, the country is the place to be.

4. The character of July Montgomery is central to *Driftless*, and has appeared in some of your earlier novels (*Rock Island Line*, *The Easter House*). What is it about July that has you returning to him again and again?

Characters serve as receptacles for our own projected feelings and through characters we imaginatively encounter parts of ourselves. Characters teach us to loosen up, not take ourselves so seriously, see other points of view, and have fun. At their best, characters shine a light into otherwise dark areas—places we can't, or won't, go on our own. They help us explore our interior world. When I found July Montgomery, he immediately wanted to take me to places I was afraid of going. But his spirit was so courageous and resilient that I was willing to go along.

5. What inspired you to write *Driftless*?

The untimely death of a friend/neighbor provided the original impetus for the story. At his funeral I understood that I knew only a small part of him. The completed picture of my friend was held compositely among all those who knew him. This presented me with a new way of looking at personal identity, at who we are or think we are, and it was this more dynamic idea of collective interaction giving rise to the qualities of personal identity that I wanted to attempt to present in the book.

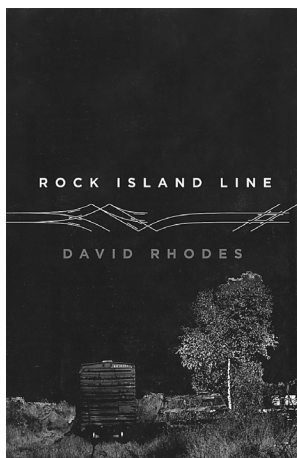
6. *Driftless* is a collage of stories, revolving around a large cast of characters whose lives intersect in various ways. How did you develop all of these characters and their stories?

For me, there are three interconnected elements of a story. The first is a sense of place—in this case the Driftless Region of Wisconsin. The place limits the kinds of characters that can effectively be imagined living there, their ways of life, and to some extent their personalities. Once a group of characters have volunteered to live in a fictional setting, the plot or action of the story comes out of them. Certain characters will only do certain things. So place gives rise to character, which in turn gives rise to action. I waited for my characters to tell me what they would and would not do. After I had a general idea for what would happen, I began the long process of refining the individual voices and stories to lead in a certain direction, toward a particular feeling I wanted to develop. This took the longest time and is more difficult to talk about coherently.

7. What writers have influenced you over the years?

I'm probably influenced by everyone I read, and I read incessantly. As a young writer I remember most wanting to learn how William Faulkner could speak for a whole family or community. His narrative voice was not an individual point of view, but rather a cultural force. Later, I came to appreciate Charles Dickens' unique abilities of characterization. All his social commentary and criticism took a second seat to his joy of human portraits, and he depicted the universal qualities of men and women through eccentric characterization. More recently I've been impressed with Louise Erdrich's ability to endow certain specific physical objects in her fiction, like a painted drum or violin, with such phantasmagoric histories that the objects themselves take on living, spiritual dimensions. I don't think I know of anyone else who takes such pains to do this.

Also available in paperback,  
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## ROCK ISLAND LINE

David Rhodes

“A kind of dark but luminous *Candide*, *Rock Island Line* is beautiful and haunting in a way you have not encountered before. I read the book when it first came out over thirty years ago and it has lived in both my heart and head ever since.”

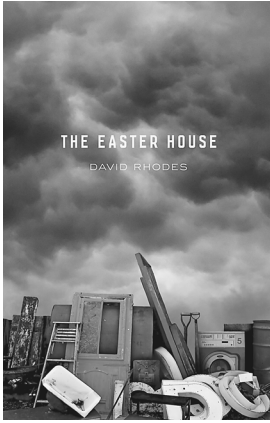
—Jonathan Carroll,  
author of *The Ghost in Love*

“Rhodes writes with both symphonic grandeur and down-to-earth humility in this galvanizing novel of ‘the quick, naked bones of survival.’ This is a descent into grief as resonant as James Agee’s, an embrace of the heartland spirit as profound as Cather’s and Marilynne Robinson’s, a story that echoes Dreiser, Steinbeck, Gardner, and Bellow—and an authentically great American novel in its own right.”

—*Booklist* (starred)

Born and raised in a small town not far from Iowa City, July Montgomery’s early years are filled with four-leaf-clovers, dogs, and fishing. But this idyllic world comes to an end with the tragic death of his parents, after which July flees via the Rock Island Line, eventually landing in Philadelphia and fashioning a ghostly home beneath an underground train station.

When a young woman frees July from his malaise, they return together to the heartland. Restored to his ancestral home and yet perched on the precipice of a disaster that could herald his end, July must decide whether to continue running, or stand still and hope for the promised dawn of Paradise Regained.



## THE EASTER HOUSE

David Rhodes

“*The Easter House* offers the tale of another tormented Midwestern clan, but in its pages no border exists between everyday life and the super-real. I wouldn’t trade a word of *The Easter House* for anything.”

—*New York Times Book Review*

“Rhodes proves that there is still vigorous life in the dark Gothic roots of great American novels.”

—*Tennessean*

“This is [an almost impossible book to put down,] with its forceful narrative and striking characters. Rhodes is a brilliant writer and *The Easter House* a moving literary experience.”

—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

The largest residence in Ontario, Iowa, looms over the town and three generations of the Easters. Ansel Easter—a minister favored by the townspeople until he rescued a Caliban-like creature from a carnival sideshow—paved a difficult path for his sons, C and Sam. After Ansel’s violent death, no one in town was surprised when his children abandoned the house their father built in search of a new beginning.

Unable to shake Ansel’s burdensome legacy from afar, the brothers return separately to the house. C and his wife start a junkyard in the expansive lawn of the Easter house and barter used appliances, cars, and random items for necessities. Eventually, C and Sam create a more lucrative business: the Associates, a group of men offering services for a fee. When a rash of deaths occur and the Ontarions suspect the Associates, the sins of the father appear to revisit the sons.

Shocking and suspenseful, *The Easter House* is an engrossing story of family redemption and survival. Originally published in 1974, David Rhodes’ second novel captures the oppressive somnolence of a small community while intertwining elements of the American gothic tradition, illuminating the strangeness that lurks beneath the surface.

Available Fall 2009

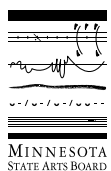
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