

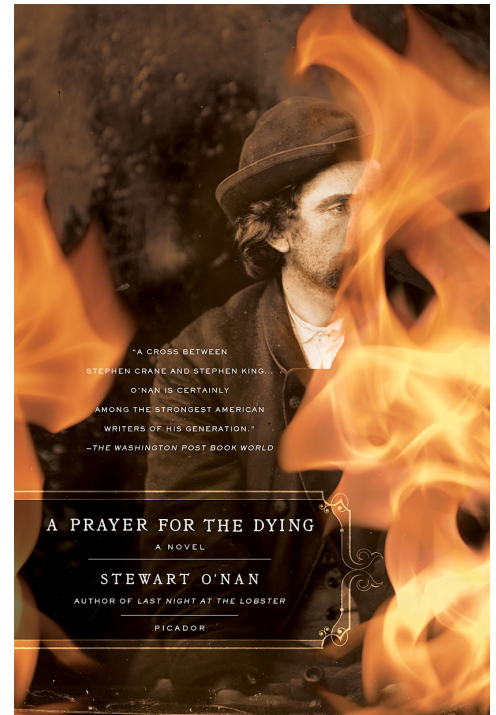
READING GROUP GUIDE

A Prayer for the Dying A Novel

by *Stewart O’Nan*



ISBN-10: 0-312-42891-X
ISBN-13: 978-0-312-42891-4



About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *A Prayer for the Dying* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *A Prayer for the Dying*.

About the Book

Set in Friendship, Wisconsin, just after the Civil War, *A Prayer for the Dying* tells of a horrible epidemic that is suddenly and gruesomely killing the town's residents and setting off a terrifying paranoia. Jacob Hansen, Friendship's sheriff, undertaker, and pastor, is soon overwhelmed by the fear and anguish around him, and his sanity begins to fray. Dark, poetic, and chilling, *A Prayer for the Dying* examines the effect of madness and violence on the morality of a once-decent man.

About the Author

Stewart O’Nan’s novels include *Last Night at the Lobster*, *The Night Country*, and *A Prayer for the Dying*. He is also the author of the nonfiction books *The Circus Fire* and, with Stephen King, the bestselling *Faithful*. *Granta* named him one of the Twenty Best Young American Novelists. He lives in Connecticut.

Discussion Questions

1. The book is narrated in the second person, addressing the main character, Jacob, as “you.” Who is speaking? Why do you think the author chose this mode to tell the story?
2. When Jacob is called to take care of Clytie, he has a very hard time pulling the trigger. Look at the passage (p. 49) in which he has to convince himself to kill her. Why does he agonize when he knows it’s the right thing? What does it mean that he’s “still clinging to some dream of innocence, blamelessness”? Does he continue to cling to that dream later in the story?
3. Why does Jacob elect to bleed and treat the bodies of some victims, even after Doc has told him not to, and even though he knows he’s putting himself in danger? Why is precision and diligence so important to him even when everyone around him is worried only about survival?
4. What role does religious faith play in the story? How does it influence Jacob, Chase, and other citizens of Friendship? Is their faith rewarded?
5. Jacob is a veteran of the Civil War. How does his experience there affect the way he behaves in the crisis in Friendship? How did the war change him?
6. How would you describe the relationship between Jacob and Doc? How do their different ideas about the world lead to different strategies for handling the outbreak in Friendship?
7. How does Jacob’s relationship with Marta affect his behavior in the outbreak? How do his priorities as a father and husband conflict with his responsibility to the town?
8. How do you interpret the book’s ending? What is Jacob choosing when he returns to Friendship? What do you imagine happening to him next?
9. Is Jacob sane at the end of the book? How does the author demonstrate the changes in his mind as conditions worsen?
10. “You’ve stopped believing in evil,” the narrator says of Jacob early in the story (p. 6). “Is that a sin?” Is there evil in this story? Does Jacob come to see it by the end?
11. How do the book’s two epigraphs relate to each other? Why do you think the author chose them?
12. Jacob is committed throughout the book to saving Friendship, and willing to sacrifice himself if necessary. Is he naïve? Does his commitment to principle do more harm than good in the end?

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