

Reader's Guide to *The Building*

Summary

The action in *The Building* unfolds over the course of a single day, a spring Friday, in a small town in the hills of western Pennsylvania, on a construction site where a new high-rise is being built. Starting early in the morning, when the field supervisor tells the jobsite superintendent not to pour the concrete for the columns—and the manager goes ahead and does it anyway—things don't go as planned. Missteps affect everyone from a welder to the inspector to the developer to the architect to the waitress in a nearby diner, but they especially affect the rebar foreman and the construction superintendent himself, whose mutual feelings for the woman living across from the site reach a crisis point, with tragic consequences. *The Building*, a deliciously dark yet ultimately hopeful novel, takes us behind the scenes into an often closed society that few have entered. It also reminds us that dangerous work should be done only with people you trust. Above all, *The Building* is a story about the triumph of love—the love between a man and a woman, the comradeship and camaraderie that develop between coworkers, and the profound dedication a worker brings to his craft.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. *The Building* gives readers a glimpse of the behind-the-scenes mechanics and the many details involved in the construction of a high-rise building. Does this insight affect the way you think about or look at high rises in your own neighborhood or vicinity?
2. Who is at fault for the accident at the construction site? If more than one character is responsible, is any particular character more at fault than another?
3. Each of the characters has evolved his or her own way of adjusting to the hardships of life—of getting through the inevitable disappointments of each day without losing sight of the joys life also has to offer. What does each character share in this effort? And in what ways do their efforts differ?
4. *The Building* is the first in a series of books set in the fictional town of Furnass, a place that, like Thomas Hardy's Wessex and William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, has its own unique characteristics and group of inhabitants. What distinguishes Furnass from its literary predecessors? What does it have in common with them?
5. What is the role of the book's italicized passages, written from the point of view of an omniscient narrator? What other books or works of literature intersperse such a viewpoint with those of various characters?
6. At one point in the book, Jack says, "You're really lucky at the end of your life if you've got six friends. I don't mean people you know, I mean real friends, people you can really count on."

You're lucky if you've got enough friends to count on the fingers of one hand." Do you agree with this statement? Does it mirror your own experience?

7. What did Gregg learn about himself from his stint as a construction inspector? If he decides to pursue it as a career, will he be a good one?

8. Vince has had certain disappointments in his career. Do you have sympathy for the way he's handled these disappointments, especially when it comes to their effect on the construction of the building?

9. Pamela seems to have two sides to her personality—the one she shows to Dickie Sutcliff and others and the one she shows only to a few people, including Jack. What lies at the root of this dichotomy? What clues do we get from Pamela's visit to her parents' house?

10. The action in *The Building* takes place in 1985. To what extent is the construction of the high-rise in Furnass a reaction to the decline of the steel industry in western Pennsylvania? How do the characters respond to these economic circumstances?

About the Author

Richard Snodgrass's short stories and essays have appeared in the *New England Review*, *Bread Loaf Quarterly*, *South Dakota Review*, *California Review*, *Pittsburgh Quarterly*, and other publications. He is the recipient of a fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and has been artist-in-residence at Light Work, in Syracuse, New York, and at the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, in Taos, New Mexico. His other books include *An Uncommon Field: The Flight 93 Temporary Memorial*, published in September of 2011 by Carnegie Mellon University Press, and *Kitchen Things: An Album of Vintage Utensils and Farm Kitchen Recipes*, published in 2013 by Skyhorse and named one of the year's "best books to get you thinking about food" by the Associated Press.