

Reader's Guide to *Across the River*

Summary

When Confederate soldiers Jonathan Reid and Judson Walker are assigned a confidential mission in the midst of the American Civil War, they are sent to the fictional town of Furnass, Pennsylvania, to strike a wartime deal with desperate Keystone Steam Works owner Colin Lyle. Masquerading as Union troops, they are ushered graciously into the home of Lyle and his wife, Libby, but soon realize that the house's residents harbor several secrets. While Reid focuses his attention on ensuring that the deal is successful and fits the needs of the Confederacy, Walker—secretly a Furnass native—quickly finds himself entangled in the Lyles' lives, growing closer to Libby and, consequentially, to uncovering several truths about the place he once knew. While the struggle between the North and the South wages on, so, too, does the battle between belonging and alienation, between love and indifference, and between defiance and ignorance in the lives of the people of Furnass. A virtuosic work of historical fiction, *Across the River* combines the experiences of imagined characters and real-life figures into an engrossing work dealing with matters of deception, power, and ethics in the lives of soldiers and civilians alike.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Would you characterize Libby as more of a northerner or southerner, especially within the context of the 1860s? Did your opinions on this change as you read? Why?
2. How does the author successfully incorporate historical figure John Hunt Morgan into the story? How does he treat him differently from the fictional characters?
3. In each of his Furnass Towers novels, Snodgrass uses italic passages to add an omniscient point of view to the narrative. How does his use of italics in *Across the River* differ from such passages in his other works?
4. Some of the most recognizable titles in fiction, including *Gone with the Wind*, by Margaret Mitchell, and *Cold Mountain*, by Charles Frazier, are set against the backdrop of the American Civil War. Discuss how *Across the River* treats the war compared to these novels.
5. During a heated discussion, Walker questions whether Colin “had to have a slave of some kind,” to which Libby replies, “I think most people do, in one form or another. Someone to do your bidding, someone or something to have dominion over.” Do you agree with this statement within the context of the novel? In present-day America?
6. Discuss the similarities and differences between Reid and Walker and how they seem to view their mission as the novel progresses. What do you think are the primary reasons for their differences?

7. At one point in the novel, Reid asserts, “I would much rather be disappointed than to know that I settled for less. Than to know that I could be satisfied to be second-rate.” Do you find yourself agreeing with this statement in your own life? Are there any exceptions—any situations in which you would willingly settle for less?
8. Aside from the specific context of the American Civil War, how do you view the ethics of Reid and Walker’s mission? Discuss how these views correspond to your thoughts on the ethics of war in general.
9. Why do Colin and McArtle react so differently to Reid and Walker’s presence in Furnass? Examine how their backstories, as well as their relationship with each other, contribute to this contrast.
10. For what reasons does Sally’s assessment of Walker change so drastically as the story develops? In what ways are Sally’s actions an indication of Walker’s evolving role in the Lyle household?

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*, 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.