

Reader's Guide to *Holding On*

Summary

Holding On , a collection of short stories, opens with the 1764 narrative of two soldiers of the Forty-Second Royal Highland Regiment of Foot as they pursue a lost flock of sheep through what will eventually become the fictional town of Furnass, Pennsylvania. From there, the soldiers' tale is woven among fourteen short stories set in Furnass between the 1950s and the 1980s. One story focuses on a twelve-year-old boy who has several unsettling encounters during the course of a single day that force him to reevaluate how he views the world. Another narrates the story of a break-in from the perspectives of both the elderly homeowner and the trespasser. An abusive husband, his wife, and his partner on the police force are at the center of another story as they deal with a life-changing injury. Regardless of the subject, all the stories in this collection offer snapshots of ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances, simply trying to get by. Written with lyrical realism, insight, and compassion, *Holding On* paints a memorable portrait of life in a small town and all it entails: a balance between love and indifference, jealousy and trust, work and play.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think Snodgrass chose to arrange the stories out of chronological order? Can you see a method to the way he has ordered them?
2. Discuss Snodgrass's decision to set the soldiers' story in italics and interrupt it with twentieth-century narratives. Apart from the setting, what parallels can you draw between the soldiers' story and the others?
3. Compare "Almost a Shutout" with the others in the collection in terms of how it portrays loss and the passage of time. Are the characters' coping mechanisms unique to the experience of living in a small town like Furnass?
4. A William Maxwell quotation—"With small town people, every story is part of some other story"—serves as the book's epigraph. Can you identify "some other story" in each of the stories in *Holding On* ? Are these other stories explicit or implicit?
5. Only two stories in this collection, "Larry-Berry" and "Meeting of Minds," are written from a first-person perspective. Why do you think the author chose this device for these two stories? In what other ways are these two stories similar?
6. How do the stories in this collection mesh with Snodgrass's various Furnass novels? Do the stories in *Holding On* shed any light on the novels or vice versa?
7. At one point in "Larry-Berry," Larry muses, "But, you know, it's hard to ignore somebody you don't like. It's harder to ignore someone you don't like than it is to pay

attention to somebody you do like.” Do you find this to be true? Discuss instances of this within your own life and within the context of the other stories in *Holding On*.

8. Discuss why you think Snodgrass chose “Holding On” as the title story. What makes this the best representation of the collection as a whole?
9. James Joyce’s *Dubliners* is another collection of short stories that focuses on the lives of the inhabitants of a single town (or, in Joyce’s case, a city). How do Joyce and Snodgrass differ in their approaches? What similarities can you draw, despite the differences between locales and time periods?
10. Do you think Snodgrass has sympathy for some of his characters more than others? Are there any characters in *Holding On* for whom he does not appear to have sympathy?

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.