

Reader's Guide to *A BOOK OF DAYS*

Summary

This unusual three-part historical novel in the form of nested stories begins in 1821, when two young siblings, Colin and Lydia, discover a book written in a strange language in an old blockhouse on their family's property. Unable to decipher it or discern its origins, Lydia, the elder child, uses it nonetheless for an illicit game. Within this outer narrative framework is a second framework, set further back in time, in 1776. Before Colin and Lydia discover it, the book—which we learn is written in Gaelic—found its way into the possession of a secretive man who reads it aloud to a woman named Sara, translating it into English as he goes. Sara believes that the book may hold the answers to her mother's fate. The innermost narrative framework consists of the book itself: the journal of Ensign Thomas Keating, an officer in the Forty-Second Royal Highland Regiment of Foot, sent to America in the 1760s during Pontiac's Rebellion. Keating's tale is a harrowing one: he and a ragtag group of troops, along with a mysterious woman named Elizabeth, trek through the Pennsylvania wilderness, through what will later become the town of Furnass, in search of the rest of Keating's brigade, who left to find the source of a suspicious column of smoke upriver. Told from these three perspectives, the story of the journal's life-changing influence traverses the formative decades of the American nation. A dark, absorbing read, *A Book of Days* raises questions of the foundations of society, morality, and human nature and unpacks the interconnected concepts of fear, trust, and love.

Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. Much of the book is told from the perspective of Thomas Keating, whose viewpoint crowds out the potential counterbalancing effect of other perspectives. Did you find Keating to be a reliable narrator? What about Keating's narration style led you to this conclusion?
2. Snodgrass's novel is similar to A. S. Byatt's *Possession* in that both works are organized to contain stories within stories. How do their approaches to this distinct structure differ? What similarities can you draw between the two?
3. Crows are widely known as an omen of death, and their presence is abundant in *A Book of Days*. Besides the obvious, what do you feel their role is in this novel? Do you think their significance evolves as the novel progresses? Does the presence of crows mean different things to different characters?
4. Love, in many forms, is a central theme that runs throughout the book. How many different types of love can you distinguish in the novel? Do any of them seem to overlap or influence another? Discuss how different characters experience these emotions in unique ways.

5. Discuss why Snodgrass chooses the story of two children to bookend *A Book of Days*. What parallels can you draw between Colin's and Lydia's lives and those portrayed in the other sections of the book? How do the themes of love and trust pertain to this story?
6. At one point in the novel, Donald Fraser quotes Hume to his companions by asserting, "The minds of all men are similar in their feelings and operations," which sparks a debate regarding the quotation's meaning. What do you think the philosopher means? Does this interpretation make sense within the context of the novel?
7. What do you think were Elizabeth's true motives for her actions, especially as the journal draws to a close? Discuss the clues throughout the novel that led you to this conclusion.
8. Discuss how Keating's experiences with Jean affect his actions in America, particularly with Elizabeth. Do you think he would have reacted the same way to Elizabeth had he not known Jean in the capacity that he did?
9. How did you initially interpret the news that Lieutenant Stewart was "marked for vengeance"? Did your understanding of this phrase evolve as you read? How?
10. *A Book of Days* is the only Furness novel without an omniscient narrator who speaks in italic passages. Why do you think Snodgrass made this decision? What does the lack of an all-knowing perspective do to the reader's experience?

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.