

# COAL

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# BLACK

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# HORSE

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A Conversation with the Author

A Reading and Discussion Guide





## A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

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**Although the novel is largely about a boy's journey, it is also about a very particular moment in history. Much of its power comes from the Civil War battle scenes, which feel so real and visceral. What kind of research did you do to re-create those scenes?**

It began with a visit to Gettysburg. As a boy growing up in New Hampshire, my war of fascination was the American Revolution, but when living in southern Pennsylvania I began to wonder about the Civil War. So I went to Gettysburg to see the battlefield and slowly but surely began to feel myself drawn into that experience. I was trying, as a curious person, to learn about it and understand it. I began to read and one thing led to another. I visited other battlefields and somewhere along the way I decided I wanted to try to write this novel. Again, as a way to experience it. I was as ignorant of this world as Robey Childs and in a sense I invented him so that we could discover it together. I remember I was at Shiloh for a major reenactment and was standing inside a battery of cannons. I could feel the concussive force of the explosions against my body and coming up through the earth. My face felt wet and when I wiped at my nose it was bleeding. I thought how that

must have happened to the artillerists and for a moment I had the tiniest glimpse of their experience.

**You're not from the South, yet you capture your characters' voices and diction so well. Did you read Civil War accounts or did it come by way of instinct?**

It's true, I'm not Southern born but was raised in the country in the northern reach of the Appalachian chain. A lot of similarities up north and down south along that spine of those mountains. And the mountains of West Virginia, the fictional setting of Robey's home, exists in a kind of not-south not-north ether. Even in ancient times it was a place where the northern tribes and southern tribes brushed up against each other and was a kind of no-man's-land, contested territory and a place where you could get killed. As to the voices, I think of them as rural and arcadian, naturally sardonic, and trenchant. My family had an amazing talent for the aphoristic and the epigrammatic. This went a long way in establishing authority in a character. When Hettie Childs first spoke she came onto the page as if she'd been waiting 150 years and finally this was her moment. She is real to me in every way.

**It seems as though the coal black horse is equally real to you. Did you grow up with horses?**

Horses, cows, pigs, sheep. Yes. The farm is still there and I get home every chance I can. The coal black horse began as a simple means of conveyance. The boy needed a good horse if he was to carry out his mother's imperative. He needed a horse with experience he lacked. So I came up with the coal

black horse and then the strangest thing happened. With each draft the horse became more and more prominent. The horse grew in my mind and grew on the page and in time the horse was the same to me as it was to Robey Childs. I mean that literally. Such a horse as I imagined was lustrously iridescent. Like coal when turned to the light. I was amazed when I first saw the hardcover jacket my publisher did for the hardcover. It is so arresting. It really took my breath away. And of course there is something ancient and timeless about the horse and the rider. The horse is consort and for thousands of years we have lived together by agreement. I think they are very beautiful. Sometimes I think, like Hettie, the coal black horse was out there the whole time and just waiting for Robey and me to come along.

**In the process of writing the book, did you think about how warfare has changed since the Civil War?**

Combat actually changed during that war. Take for instance the minie ball, invented by Captain Claude-Étienne Minié of France. This was a high-caliber grooved conical lead bullet. It could be loaded quickly, and because it was grooved, when fired from a rifle it was very accurate over a long distance, and yet the generals still believed in massed lines of men in close formation charging over open ground. New weapons, old tactics. Wounds were especially horrible and so many wounded required amputation because the minie ball did not just break bone but actually shattered whole sections of bone, and the bone could not be mended.

But however terrible and chaotic war is, I think instances of courage and dignity and sacrifice in warfare are timeless

and universal. I am not sure if it's true, but I read that the men who retreated after Pickett's famous charge walked backwards because it would have been ignoble to have been shot in the back.

Even now I think the reasons why boys and men go to war haven't changed. We must recognize what a great adventure war is. If not for the Civil War thousands and thousands of young men were destined to live their entire lives in the same place, the same town. They saw the war as an escape from daily lives that were relentlessly boring and tedious. War is extremely liberating and purifying and for so many men, they were never so alive as when they were at war. It is not acceptable to talk about this love of war, but I think it's real. I do not think this has changed. William Faulkner wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

**What was the biggest challenge for you in writing the novel?**

I think all writers are more interested in what they don't know than what they do know. Naturally, helplessly, hopelessly curious about everything. Research is so fascinating. I just loved all that reading and those experiences, but ultimately I am a dramatist, not a historian. So, two things: First I had to acknowledge how inexhaustible the information is and literally begin to turn away from it. Second, I had to find a way to animate the story I wanted to tell. But, where to start? And how to start? And where to go from there? In a sense, all stories are about what we mean to ourselves and what we mean to each other. It's really that simple, but every one of them has to be different. I thought about the boy leaving home and entering

that landscape. He was really quite the innocent. He was born in remoteness. It was his story I wanted to tell—a boy sent out to bring his father home, a boy looking for his father. I think for all time mothers have been sending their sons to bring home their fathers. I think about how hard it was for her to send him. I assumed a vein of iron in these people. I think there are people who have such faith in each other.

**Your characters do seem to retain faith under very difficult circumstances. Did any of them surprise you?**

Yes, late in the novel, at Gettysburg when Robey takes justice into his own hands. I remember the days when writing that scene. I do not approve of what he did, but I could not stop him. It was as if his will was discovered and he became a powerful influence in every rewrite thereafter, and there were quite a few. Hettie seemed to come onto the page all at once and it was only afterward that I realized how powerful her presence is throughout the book. She is present in the opening and the ending, but for me she was never very far away. She possessed a kind of strength and wisdom and equanimity that the world so lacked. And of course the coal black horse becoming more prominent by increments until finally it became the title. I still have dreams about them.

**Are there any other characters who are entering your dreams? Is there another novel unfolding in your mind?**

I have never thought of writing as something I do but as a place where I go. There I find a community and a language and an experience of totality. So, yes. The event at the end of

*Coal Black Horse*, the birth. When I first realized that Rachel was pregnant, I felt an overwhelming responsibility and only later, when she eventually gives birth, did I know she was having twins. As I have mentioned, there are days you remember when you are working and these were two of them: her being pregnant and then having twins. I just couldn't let that go, so in the book I'm working on now, I am telling their story, only it is years and years later and they are grown men.

## A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

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1. Why do you think Robey's mother sends him on a dangerous journey to find his father? How do you feel about her decision?
2. Robey is reminded of his mother as he travels. For example, when he is shot: "He was in pain and his mother always said that pain was weakness leaving the body" (page 53). Where else in the story do you find her presence? How would you characterize their relationship?
3. In what ways does the landscape at the farm, on the road, on the battlefield, and in Gettysburg inform the story and affect Robey and the people around him?
4. In his travels Robey sees a lot of strange, beautiful, and gruesome things. For example, the horse skeleton covered with vines and flowers (page 26) and then the description of the man's skeleton a few pages later (page 29). What other examples of this juxtaposition can you find? How do they affect how you understand Robey's journey?
5. Robey meets so many characters on the road—Morphew, the German, the upside-down boy, the goose man, the major, the pregnant woman in the graveyard, the scavenger

brothers. How do these secondary characters help (or impair) Robey's quest to find his father?

6. What role do fate and second sight play in the novel? For example, Robey's mother knows that Thomas Jackson has died without being told and that Robey must find his father before July. What other examples can you find, and how do fate and premonition guide your own life?
7. Morpew tells Robey that he is "in for an education" (page 21). After a battle later in the story, Robey has this encounter with the coal black horse (page 112): "Then he urged the horse on and it hesitated before responding as if to acknowledge that its rider had learned some valuable lesson and should be rewarded for such." What is Robey learning? How does he acknowledge his education?
8. Throughout the course of the novel Robey has to make hard decisions such as stealing food and horses. How does he feel about these decisions? In what ways do they seem to change him?
9. Robey doesn't kill the man who rapes Rachel even though he has the opportunity and cause to do so. Why doesn't he?
10. Religion plays a significant role over the course of the story, perhaps most dramatically in this revelation on page 116: "He decided from that day forever after that there must live a heartless God to let such despair be visited on the earth, or as his father said, a God too tired and no longer capable of doing the work required of him." How do religion and spirituality shape the novel?

11. Pages 124–26 describe the scavengers and minor businesses that spring up in the wake of battle. How does Robey seem to feel about this? How does this affect your perception of the Civil War?
12. The pregnant woman in the graveyard tells Robey that “people should be born twice: once as they are and once as they are not” (page 130). What does she mean by this? How does this tie into the themes of the novel?
13. How would you describe Robey’s relationship with his mother, the coal black horse, his father, and Rachel? How is each relationship different and alike? And how do these relationships define Robey as a boy and Robey as a man?
14. War has affected the land and the people—for example, the “raggedy old woman with a sun-stained and stroke-twisted face” (page 178). To what extent have the characters, the land, and even the animals been affected by the ravages of war?
15. How does the birth of the twins change Robey? How does it change Rachel? Do you have the sense that things will be better or worse for the family? Why?
16. How has Robey’s story altered the way you think about war and violence? Has it made you think about love and faith differently? Are there particular passages that reflect your opinions and feelings?