



Book Discussion Guide

North Woods by Daniel Mason

Created by Madeline Bugeau-Heartt

Introduction

The Summer Fiction Book Club is an invitation for participants to become immersed in the creative world of fiction books while daring to explore challenging topics related to climate change and environmental injustice. Each month, participants read a selected book on their own time, and then we gathered virtually to discuss as a group. In addition to small group discussion, a guest conversation partner joined to offer their thoughts on the book and share about its impact in their life.

Simply put, fiction has the potential to reveal present realities and imagine possible futures. Through truth-telling, a good story confronts the current systems of power, the unequal material conditions, or the overwhelming circumstances that prevent all life from flourishing. It gives voice to whomever or whatever has been silenced, forgotten, or ignored — the lives of marginalized humans and exploited nonhumans, the values or perspectives that advocate for collective good, or the complex emotions that humans may experience during planetary polycrisis. Fiction can also be a window through which we envision compelling and creative possibilities, whether social, ecological, political, or economic. Imagining what worlds are possible creates the opportunity for us to build towards a better and more just future.

Reading fiction together is a dynamic way for humans to make sense of the world(s) in which we live. By coming together to discuss these books, we also collectively share the weightiness of the subjects. Readers may find a book club to be a space where they can encounter fictional worlds, exercise their imaginative capacities, and even explore and experience their own emotions through the narrative lens of fiction.

The following discussion questions can be used by any group wishing to engage around the novel *North Woods* by Daniel Mason. A video clip from the discussion of the novel during our Summer Fiction Book Club in June 2024 is offered to provide additional perspective and basis for discussion.

Intro to *North Woods* (from the publisher)

North Woods is a sweeping novel about a single house in the woods of Western Massachusetts, told through the lives of those who inhabit it across the centuries. Following the cycles of history, nature, and even language, *North Woods* shows the myriad, magical ways in which we're connected to our environment, to history, and to one another. It is not just an unforgettable novel about secrets and destinies, but a way of looking at the world that asks the timeless question: How do we live on, even after we're gone?

Guest conversationalist from our June 2024: Maggid David Arfa (with Nicole Diroff)

Link to Session Recording: <https://vimeo.com/968151677>

Discussion: Minute markers 10:00- 46:00 (36 minutes long)

Discussion questions

1. What is one theme, scene, storyline, or quote that captured your imagination, and why?
2. How does thinking about Time as a character in this book work on the understandings of your own life?
3. Where did you notice the natural world becoming more than a setting and actually becoming an element in the story with agency?
4. What do you make of the story's entwined roles of fear, uncertainty, hauntings, violence, and love?
5. How might the work's theme of succession translate to your own spiritual landscape?
6. Would you consider this book to be "climate fiction"? How might reading this help someone facing the real-life realities of climate change in our world today?

A Reflective Letter on North Woods from Maggid David Arfa

The opportunity to read *North Woods* with The BTS Center has been like entering an orchard of delight. Each chapter brought surprise and mystery — what would I find? Instantly we begin with a chase, runaway lovers, stolen kisses, and sensual descriptions as they follow deer paths through forest, valley and bog. Playful glee and joy are the feeling tones that appear within this dire chase. We are reassured that they are alright as they enter "The Realm" and become "Nature's Ward." Even the chasing dogs who track and then find them conspire to keep their secret safe. What is this lush, protective and exciting storyworld we have entered?

A beautifully rendered, living landscape is the stage as well as the supporting actor for the generations of people (including myself) who have called this place, the North Woods of Western Massachusetts, home. Through a wide range of first person accounts, journal entries, love letters, psychological reports, newspaper articles, historical society minutes, songs and recipes, we get to know this place and its effects on the people who live there. The story transforms like the land, and encompasses many genres— a love story, family drama, murder mystery, psychological thriller and even a seance; there's time travel and a bunch of ghosts too! What a horn of plenty; a true cornucopia; a most splendid summer read.

In addition to the thought-provoking questions supplied by The BTS Center, I'd like to bring our attention to the handful of biblical quotes sprinkled throughout the dramatic captives story in Chapter Two. Partly, it seems our author is using the Bible to bring an "old-timey" feel to the language. Nowhere else, as far as I read, conveys any biblical or even religious sentiment. The spiritual roots of the seance are certainly not portrayed. And yet, like any story, new meaning is generated as it connects with our own lives.

I was moved by the diversity of feelings conveyed through these quotes. Bitter rage, despair, and exasperation; feeling meaninglessness around our personal journeys, and also deep faith living in a God-centered world. I appreciate these examples of the Bible as they support us, naming our existential experiences and being able, through lament and enlarged perspective, to strengthen our inner lives.

Here are the quotes in order of appearance:

- 1.) *"Break the jaws of the wicked and pluck the spoil from their teeth..."*
- 2.) *"But shall he die in the place whither they have led him captive, and shall see this place no more?"*
- 3.) *"Will you require of us a song?"*
- 4.) *"As for man; his days are as grass; as a flower of the field so he flourisheth. For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone, and the place thereof shall know of it no more."*
- 5.) *"...for is not every beast of the field Mine?"*

I want to appreciate Daniel Mason's intuition that the Bible can support us in all that we go through. He does not limit his biblical repertoire to variations of that oppressive biblical bird song- "cheery cheer-upness." Working as an interfaith hospital chaplain, I repeatedly meet people who assume that acknowledging their sadness and pain is not being faithful to their reading of the Bible. Does no one read the psalms anymore? How liberating, how empowering to allow our deepest feelings to be mirrored and acknowledged through sacred text...

As our generation returns to the biblical textual tradition, with our new lens of ecological consciousness, may we not be dismayed by the naysayers who make a great show of claiming ownership and limiting the bible's boundaries. The Jewish tradition, my tradition, has long taught that every verse is like an orchard, with layers of grammatical, allegorical, philosophical and mystical meaning available. Each verse waits, like freeze dried food, or seeds in a jar, for the warmth and moisture of our generation's heartfelt response.

In Hebrew, the acronym for this multilayered reading is *pardes*- which literally means orchard. How appropriate for this novel! After all, the family orchard felt to me like the very heart of our story. How interesting that one character's (Charles Osgood) following of his dream and heart was considered crazy by his sister. After all, today, whether your love is glazed doughnuts or you are "crazy" about pies, all sorts of entrepreneurial encouragement exists. Witnessing the farmer's tenacity and success was so satisfying!

I'd like to end with the name Osgood gave his apple. I recommend revisiting that entire section for the sheer joy and surprise it provides. After many humorous and erudite possibilities, Osgood's daughters guide him to land upon the name WONDER. Reading through "BTS eyes," truly this was the most meaningful and WONDERful choice. Does not the awakening we seek begin with wonder? As we struggle to respond to this world that is both burning and enlivening, is it not Wonder that guides us back into relationship, allowing us to recommit to this new world, this new day, yet again? For a long time I wondered if it was authentic to bring ecological concerns into Jewish life. Was it just a 20th century concern? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel and his experiential theology of awe and wonder,

written in the decade following the Holocaust, showed me that yes, these themes run deep and true throughout religious tradition.

Feelings of awe and wonder help us prioritize our life, if we don't stop at the merely aesthetic. Heschel shares with us that our feelings of awe and wonder are nothing less than an encounter with holiness, our encounter with God. The encounter is also a question.

Heschel writes in *Man is Not Alone* (written in 1951) after most of his family was murdered en masse that, "endless wonder unlocks an innate sense of indebtedness. Within our awe there is no place for our self assertion. Within our awe we only know that all we own, we owe. The world consists not of things, but of tasks. Wonder is the state of our being asked. The ineffable is a question addressed to us."

And this from *God in Search of Man*, his expansion from the above book. He writes, "As civilization advances, the sense of wonder declines...Humankind will not perish for want of information; but only for want of appreciation. The beginning of our happiness lies in the understanding that life without wonder is not worth living. What we lack is not a will to believe, but a will to wonder."

May the North Woods, in book and forest, help awaken us to this new will power: the will to wonder. May we remember this with every delicious apple we eat.

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