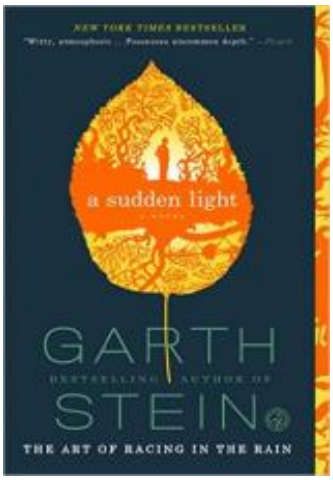
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

A Sudden Light

by Garth Stein



About the Book

When a boy tries to save his parents? marriage, he uncovers a legacy of family secrets in a coming-of-age ghost story by the author of the internationally bestselling phenomenon, THE ART OF RACING IN THE RAIN.

In the summer of 1990, 14-year-old Trevor Riddell gets his first glimpse of Riddell House. Built from the spoils of a massive timber fortune, the legendary family mansion is constructed of giant, whole trees, and is set on a huge estate overlooking Puget Sound. Trevor?s bankrupt parents have begun a trial separation, and his father, Jones Riddell, has brought Trevor to Riddell House with a goal: to join forces with his sister, Serena, dispatch Grandpa Samuel --- who is flickering in and out of dementia --- to a graduated living facility, sell off the house and property for development into ?tract housing for millionaires,? divide up the profits, and live happily ever after.

But Trevor soon discovers there?s someone else living in Riddell House: a ghost with an agenda of his own. For while the land holds tremendous value, it is also burdened by the final wishes of the family patriarch, Elijah, who mandated it be allowed to return to untamed forestland as a penance for the millions of trees harvested over the decades by the Riddell Timber company. The ghost will not rest until Elijah?s wish is fulfilled, and Trevor?s willingness to face the past holds the key to his family?s future.

A SUDDEN LIGHT is a rich, atmospheric work that is at once a multigenerational family saga, a historical novel, a ghost story, and the story of a contemporary family?s struggle to connect with each other. A tribute to the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest, it reflects Garth Stein?s outsized capacity for empathy and keen understanding of human motivation, and his rare ability to see the unseen: the universal threads that connect us all.

Discussion Guide

1. The novel is narrated by Trevor as an adult looking back on his time at Riddell House. How does his adult point of

view shape the narrative? Why do you think the author chose to frame the novel this way? How would it have been different if the story were told from Jones?s perspective?

2. Jones tells Trevor that they are going to Riddell House so they can convince Samuel to sell it. What other reasons does Jones have for returning? What does he really hope will come of their visit?

3. What sort of woman is Serena? Why do you think she never left Riddell House? In what ways does she control the family narrative? What are some of her redemptive qualities?

4. Grandpa Samuel talks about what his wife, Isobel, knew: ?If you feel you don?t have enough, you hold on to things. But if you feel you have enough, you let go of things.? Do you agree? What does each character in the novel hold on to and how does it motivate their actions? Who is most willing to let go?

5. A SUDDEN LIGHT features generations of men. Other than Serena, the women in the story play a relatively minor role yet often have a lasting impact. How did Isobel, Rachel and Alice influence the men in their lives?

6. Consider the theme of redemption in the novel. What drives Elijah?s and Benjamin?s wish to return The North Estate to its original wild forest? What do they have to atone for? Will returning the land to wilderness redeem them?

7. Why was Benjamin so conflicted during his lifetime? Is his internal conflict a result of his upbringing or education or sexuality? How much of it is a product of the place and time in which he lived?

8. What is the significance of the carving of a hand holding a globe that Harry made for Riddell House? What does the carving symbolize to Benjamin, Isobel, Samuel, Jones and Trevor?

9. The ?eternal groaning? is one of the characteristics of Riddell House. How are Riddell House and The North Estate used as characters in the novel?

10. The beauty and power of nature deeply move Benjamin and Trevor. What do they experience while climbing the great tree near Riddell House? How is Trevor transformed by the climb? Have you felt something similar in nature?

11. Trevor tells Dickie that he chooses truth over loyalty. Do you think seeking answers makes Trevor disloyal to his family? When Trevor reveals what he has learned to his father, what happens?

12. How does the author?s portrayal of ghosts and spirits differ from other ghost stories you?ve read? Did the distinction of ghosts versus spirits make sense to you? Why were Trevor and Samuel the only ones who could see the ghosts?

13. In what way was Jones?s death an act of love? How was it a promise he had to fulfill?

14. Elijah Riddell wrote: ?no man is beyond redemption as long as he acts in redeemable ways? and Ben wrote: ?It is not in prayer, but in deeds that we find absolution.? What burdens have Elijah, Ben, Samuel, Jones, Serena, and Trevor each carried? Was each a permanent obstacle to success in life? Were the characters able to change their fates?

15. What does ?faith? mean in the context of this novel? Are faith and belief the same thing? How would you answer the question: ?How do we reconcile the differences between what we see and what we know??

Enhance Your Book Club

The writings of John Muir play a key part in A SUDDEN LIGHT. Research John Muir?s life and read some of his works. Discuss the influence Muir had on Benjamin and on this novel.

Choose an outdoor setting --- such as a member?s backyard, a local park, or a restaurant patio --- for your book club meeting in which to discuss A SUDDEN LIGHT.

If there a mansion or estate in your area that is open to the public, consider touring it with your group and learning about the history of the house and those who built it. What would the land have looked like before it was developed? What impact did the house?s owner have on your local area?

Author Bio

Garth Stein is the author of the *New York Times* bestselling novel THE ART OF RACING IN THE RAIN, published in 35 languages. He is also the author of two previous novels, HOW EVAN BROKE HIS HEAD AND OTHER SECRETS and RAVEN STOLE THE MOON. He lives in Seattle with his family.

Photo Credit: Susan Doupé Photography

A Sudden Light

by Garth Stein

Publication Date: September 15, 2015
Genres: Fiction, Mystery, Supernatural
Paperback: 432 pages
Publisher: Simon & Schuster
ISBN-10: 1439187045
ISBN-13: 9781439187043