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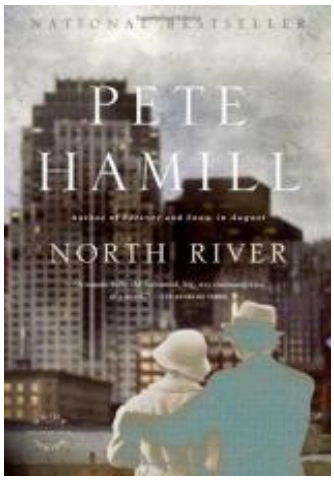
North River

by Pete Hamill



About the Book

It is 1934, and New York City is in the icy grip of the Great Depression. With enormous compassion, Dr. James Delaney tends to his hurt, sick, and poor neighbors, who include gangsters, day laborers, prostitutes, and housewives. If they can't pay, he treats them anyway.

But in his own life, Delaney is emotionally numb, haunted by the slaughters of the Great War. His only daughter has left for Mexico, and his wife Molly vanished months before, leaving him to wonder if she is alive or dead. Then, on a snowy New Year's Day, the doctor returns home to find his three-year-old grandson on his doorstep, left by his mother in Delaney's care. Coping with this unexpected arrival, Delaney hires Rose, a tough, decent Sicilian woman with a secret in her past. Slowly, as Rose and the boy begin to care for the good doctor, the numbness in Delaney begins to melt.

Recreating 1930s New York with the vibrancy and rich detail that are his trademarks, Pete Hamill weaves a story of honor, family, and one man's simple courage that no reader will soon forget.

Discussion Guide

1. Although Dr. Delaney doesn?t always let it show, he appears to be under great stress from his work. How does he cope with this emotional strain? Why do you think Delaney feels compelled to help people as he does, despite the additional burden it places on him?

2. Dr. Delaney has had a difficult life. How does Delaney?s past haunt him in the present? To what degree do you think he has healed by the end of the novel?

3. Why does Grace leave Carlos with Delaney? Do you feel her actions are justified by her explanation? What role do you think her relationship with her own father played in this decision?

4. At one point in the novel, Knocko calls Rose ?a real hoodlum? (page 74). What do you think he means by this? How do you think Rose?s personality contrasts with Delaney?s? What effect does her presence have on him?

5. Many of the characters in **North River**are recent immigrants. In Hamill?s portrait of these immigrants, how is their role in the New
York City of the Depression era similar to or different from the role of immigrants in American society today?

6. In his writings, Pete Hamill is known for painting portraits of life in New York City. How does New York itself emerge as a character in **North River**? To what degree are the time period and setting crucial to the story?

7. What is the significance of the North River in the novel? How does the imagery the author uses evolve over the course of the story? Do you think it is an apt metaphor for Delaney?s life?

8. How does popular culture --- movies, music, the radio --- function in this novel? And what role was played in the world of this novel by the daily newspapers?

9. How does Delaney balance his various duties --- to his country, to friends, and to his neighborhood --- with his own personal desires and love for his family? Do you think he balances them successfully?
If not, where do you believe he makes more sacrifices than he should? What might you have done differently?

10. Like millions of other Americans, Delaney?s life was permanently changed by serving in a foreign war. Do you see any parallels to veterans of Vietnam, or of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan?

11. Many characters in this novel are tough, without being mean. Has such a quality vanished from today?s life in America?

12. One presence in this novel has in fact vanished: the big city political machine. Such machines were often corrupt but did play important roles in urban life --- for example, in handling the arrival of immigrants in large numbers. Are there any lessons here for today?s world?

Author Bio

Pete Hamill is a novelist, journalist, editor and screenwriter. He is the author of more than 20 books, including the bestselling novels TABLOID CITY, FOREVER and SNOW IN AUGUST, and the bestselling memoir A DRINKING LIFE. He writes a column for the *New York Daily News* and lives in New York City.

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