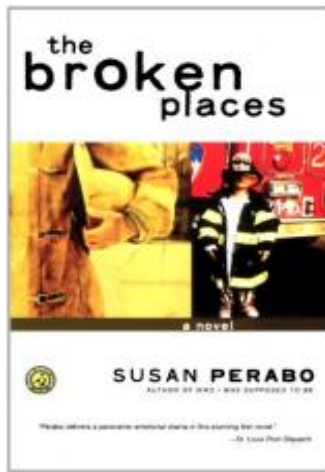


The Broken Places: A Novel

by Susan Perabo



About the Book

When an abandoned farmhouse collapses in Casey, Pennsylvania, twelve-year-old Paul Tucker's father, Sonny, and the other Casey firemen attempt a dangerous rescue to reach a teenager buried under the rubble. Sonny himself is trapped by a secondary collapse and Paul and his mother fear the worst, but Sonny -- a second-generation fireman beloved in town -- emerges hours later, carrying the maimed body of sixteen-year-old Ian Finch. The rescue of this swastika-tattooed hoodlum -- who may have brought the house down while building bombs -- becomes a validation of all things American and true, and Sonny is immediately hailed as a national hero. But Ian's continued presence in Sonny's life creates a new set of hurdles for young Paul -- and his mother and his hometown -- to overcome.

Discussion Guide

1. Perabo imparts a lot of information in Chapter One. Recount the chapter's main events and the pictures that were created in your head. What kind of details does the author provide about Paul, Sonny, and Laura? What other characters are introduced? Who stands out for you, and why?
2. Look at Perabo's word choices and descriptions in the first couple of pages in Chapter Two -- "kneaded the chill," "chafe the backs of his thighs," "fingers were blistered," "feet were numb," etc. How does she build tension? How does the author cinematically craft the roles of the book's characters, and the places they inhabit, so they become alive in the reader's mind?
3. On pages 47 to 49, beginning with, "He zipped up..." to "Don't you stop believing that," what is happening between Black Phil and Paul? What is significant about this scene? What does it reveal about Paul and Sonny?
4. Did you believe that Sonny was alive at the end of Chapter Two? Consider the last couple of paragraphs in the chapter -- what did you think was going on? Look at how Perabo forecasts events and share where she does this and

whether or not you think this is successful.

5. Review page 59, where Laura says, "Sonny doesn't get freaked out, he'll be fine," then page 107, where she says, "We'll all be back to normal." Explain whether or not you thought that Sonny would be fine, that everything would get back to normal, and why. Considering how stoic and serene she appears to be, discuss why Laura may have said these things.

6. Turn to Chapter Four and look at Sonny's actions. Discuss why you believe he was so desperate to ride in the big car instead of with his crew. Did this raise your suspicions about what really happened with the "rescue"? When Ben said, "A team rides together...." (page 81), what is he really saying to Sonny? What is Perabo telling the reader when Ian Finch appears at that same moment when Ben says, "A team rides together..."? Discuss whether or not you picked this up at the time you read it or after the truth of the rescue was disclosed.

7. Trace what happened to Sonny after he "rescued" Ian. Why is Sonny nervous during the TV interview at home? Why does Paul enjoy spending time with his mother during his father's absence (Chapter Five, page 118)? What is the symbolism of Laura's drumming? What other symbols and metaphors did you discover in **The Broken Places**?

8. In Chapter Five, look at Sonny and Paul's conversation beginning, "For a long moment he didn't answer...the blanks" (pages 140 to 141). What is Sonny saying, and why? Share your reactions to Ian's admission that he saved Sonny (page 145).

9. What does Finch represent to Laura, to Paul, and to Sonny? Why does Laura call Finch "a goner"? Knowing what you know about him, why doesn't Ian escape from his difficult life? Why does Paul say to Ian, "But I don't care" (Chapter Eight, page 204). Share whether or not you agree that Paul's father "told the story everyone wanted to hear," and why. Why do you think Ian went along with the lie?

10. What does the title **The Broken Places** refer to? Explore the broken places in the lives of each of the main characters and share your thoughts about them. How did Perabo's story affect, and enlighten, you about people's travails and human nature?

Author Bio

Susan Perabo is the author of the collections of short stories **WHO I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE** and **WHY THEY RUN THE WAY THEY DO** and the novel **THE BROKEN PLACES**. Her fiction has been anthologized in *Best American Short Stories*, *Pushcart Prize Stories* and *New Stories from the South*, and has appeared in numerous magazines, including *One Story*, *Glimmer Train*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Missouri Review* and *The Sun*. She is Writer in Residence and Professor of English at Dickinson College in Carlisle, PA, and on the faculty of the low-residency MFA Program at Queens University. She holds an MFA from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville.

Critical Praise

"A riveting novel of emotional suspense."

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