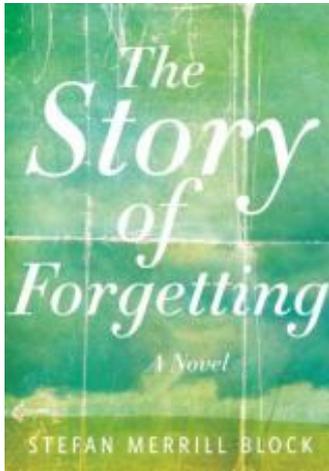


# The Story of Forgetting

by Stefan Merrill Block

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## About the Book

Abel Haggard is an elderly hunchback who haunts the remnants of his family's farm in the encroaching shadow of the Dallas suburbs, adrift in recollections of those he loved and lost long ago. Hundreds of miles to the south, in Austin, Seth Waller is a teenage "Master of Nothingness" --- a prime specimen of that gangly breed of adolescent that vanishes in a puff of sarcasm at the slightest threat of human contact. When his mother is diagnosed with a rare disease, Seth sets out on a quest to find her lost relatives and uncover the truth of her genetic history. Though neither knows of the other's existence, Abel and Seth are linked by a dual legacy: the disease that destroys the memories of those they love, and the story of Isidora --- a land without memory where nothing is ever possessed, so nothing can be lost.

Blending myth, science, and dazzling storytelling, Stefan Merrill Block's extraordinary first novel illuminates the hard-learned truth that only through the loss of what we consider precious can we understand the value of what remains.

## Discussion Guide

1. The last words of **The Story of Forgetting** are "whatever she needed she had only to imagine." Why do you think the author chose to end the book this way? In what ways is imagination essential for the book's main characters?
2. What is the relationship between the fables of Isidora and the rest of the book? How are situations, characters, and feelings from the lives of the Haggard family transformed in these fables? What is the importance of this storytelling tradition to the Haggard family?
3. What traditions do you keep that help maintain your own family's identity? How do your traditions relate to your family's history?
4. In one of the Isidora fables, a group of elders wonders, "To remember nothing... what more could one possibly ask of

eternity?? (p. 201) Despite the horrors of Alzheimer's disease, are there ways in which its most well-known symptom, memory loss, is liberating for some of the characters in this book? In certain instances, might it be better to forget?

**5.** By the end of **The Story of Forgetting**, Jamie appears desperate to return to her childhood home. Do you think she would have still felt this need if she hadn't developed Alzheimer's disease? Was it only after she had forgotten the reasons she had left, and her guilt over abandoning Abel, that she could return? Or do you think that she would have tried to return eventually, even if her memory had not failed?

**6.** In the section titled "Genetic History, Part 4," the author, describing Paul's unceasing love for Jamie Whitman, asks if love is "strong enough to gird Memory, at least for a time, against Chance's inevitable progression" (p. 243). How is love stronger than memory loss in this book? How is it not?

**7.** Have you ever known anyone with Alzheimer's disease? If so, how does the characterization of the disease in this book relate to your own experiences? How does this characterization relate to depictions you've come across in other books or films?

**8.** Before Seth and Abel know of each other's existence, they are already linked by their family's two legacies: the stories of Isidora and the devastation that the EOA-23 gene has wrought upon their loved ones. What else do Seth and Abel have in common?

**9.** **The Story of Forgetting** is written in a number of voices, genres, and time periods. Why do you think that the author chose to tell the story this way? How does this style of writing relate to the themes of memory, storytelling, family, and the quest for understanding?

**10.** Reflecting upon his decision to tell his daughter the truth about his affair with Mae, Abel understands that "out of the possibility of my wrongness in that single moment, I would serve a lifetime of penitence, loneliness, and regret" (p. 264). Do you think that it is strictly guilt that compels Abel to spend twenty years as a recluse? Do you think he really believed, twenty years after the fact, that his daughter would ever come back to him?

**11.** If you were in Jamie's position, would you tell your child the truth of his family's genetic legacy, of the 50 percent chance that he has also inherited a devastating terminal disease? Might it be better for the child not to know the truth? If you were in Seth's position, aware of the possibility that you had inherited the gene, would you get tested for it?

**12.** How does the genetic history of the EOA-23 variant illuminate the story that takes place in the present tense? How do the scientific details in these genetic-history chapters change your understanding of the book's characters and their conditions?

**13.** Near the end of Seth's "empirical investigation," Taylor Shafer asks Seth what it is that he is "hoping to find out" (p. 252). Seth realizes then that his delusions have kept him from "understanding the ridiculously simple answer to this ridiculously simple question" (p. 253). What is the "ridiculously simple answer"? Does Seth find what he is looking for?

14. Describing his mother's death by Alzheimer's disease, Abel says, "Her old soul had not so much vanished as eroded, worn away by a million rubs. I stopped praying?" (p. 182). How does Alzheimer's disease complicate or obscure the concepts of death and selfhood?

## Author Bio

Stefan Merrill Block grew up in Plano, Texas. He is the author of HOMESCHOOLED, a memoir, as well as three novels: THE STORY OF FORGETTING, THE STORM AT THE DOOR and OLIVER LOVING. Stefan's fiction has been translated into 10 languages, and his stories and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Page-Turner*, *The Guardian*, NPR's *Radiolab*, *GRANTA* and many other publications. He lives with his family in upstate New York, where he is a co-owner of Skate Time, a beloved local roller rink.

## Critical Praise

"**The Story of Forgetting** manages to feel big and small in perfect proportion, at once intimate and universal. Mr. Block has made something very beautiful out of something very ugly: a disease that steals people's lives from them... It's a book about love."

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**Publication Date:** April 1, 2008

**Genres:** Fiction

**Hardcover:** 320 pages

**Publisher:** Random House

**ISBN-10:** 1400066794

**ISBN-13:** 9781400066797