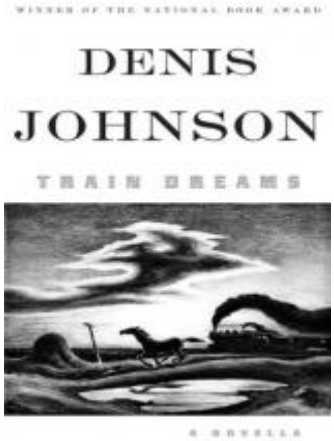
Train Dreams: A Novella

by Denis Johnson



About the Book

Throughout his award-winning career, Denis Johnson has brought us an endlessly fascinating cast of characters: sinners, saviors, and desperate souls caught in between. In **Train Dreams**, he presents a provocative portrait of a man who comes to know both excruciating hardship and quiet wonder in the American West in the first half of the twentieth century. A day laborer, Robert Grainier is on the front line in the modernization of the frontier, opening a rugged landscape to railway service, shoulder to shoulder with teams of countless men like him. Their world is divided between those who survive against astounding odds and those who succumb. Grainier is a survivor in all senses of the word: when he loses his young family, he returns to his solitary ways and struggles to make sense of the tragedy, even as he continues to feel the spiritual presence of his wife and daughter.

An epic in miniature, **Train Dreams** captures a singular chapter in the American story, set in an otherworldly landscape that has the potential to haunt anyone who attempts to subdue it. As we witness history alongside Grainier, we are forced to weigh the human toll against the awe-inspiring arrival of "civilization" as ordinary men eke out a living in extraordinary times. The result is a poignant, illuminating novella from one of the greatest storytellers of his generation.

This guide is designed to enhance your discussion of **Train Dreams**. We hope that the following questions and topics will enrich your reading of this finely honed tribute to the human experience.

Discussion Guide

1. What did the incident with the Chinese laborer show us about Robert Grainier and his beliefs regarding human suffering?

2. What made Grainier and Gladys's marriage special? How was he transformed by his role as a husband and father?

3. What does the novella tell us about the nature of survivors such as Arn Peeples (chapter two) versus those who perish? How do the characters understand death?

4. In chapter three, how was the young Grainier affected by his encounter with half-dead William Haley and the tragic tale of Haley's niece?

5. What aspects of life in the West stayed the same as Grainier matured and grew old? What aspects of his life were lost to modernization?

6. For Grainier, is solitude a form of solace and peace, or is loneliness painful for him? Is his solitary life appealing to you?

7. What does Kate's story tell us about Grainier's capacity for love? Is his community cruel or just naive?

8. In the third chapter, we're told that Grainier never knew his parents and wasn't even sure if he had been born in the United States or in Canada. In the absence of a mother and a father, who and what shaped his identity?

9. How does the novella's spectacular scenery become a character itself? How do the settlers balance the brutality of nature, captured in the horrific wildfire, with their desire to live on a frontier?

10. What does the demise of Kootenai Bob in chapter four say about the relationship between his people and the settlers? What determines who the outsiders are in Grainier's world?

11. Revisit the story of Peterson, who was shot by his own dog (chapter five). How do humans and animals get along in **Train Dreams**? What aspects of the animal world, and the spirit world, terrify the settlers the most?

12. Discuss the title. What are the dreamlike qualities of this novella? As Grainier expands the nation's rail system through his death-defying work, is he transported or trapped?

13. The novella contains many powerful scenes of backbreaking manual labor through which human beings "triumph" over nature. What circumstances drew them to this life? Under what circumstances would you be satisfied with so few creature comforts?

14. Discuss the novella's closing image. What did the wolf-boy reveal to a crowd of townspeople (including Grainier) who thought they had seen it all?

15. Much of Denis Johnson's other fiction deals with destructive wars within the self, especially in **Jesus' Son**and **Tree of Smoke**. Does **Train Dreams**underscore this view of humanity, or is it a departure from Johnson's previous work?

Author Bio

Denis Johnson was the author of nine novels, one novella, two books of short stories, five collections of poetry, two collections of plays, and one book of reportage. Among other honors, his novel TREE OF SMOKE won the 2007 National Book Award and was a finalist for the 2007 Pulitzer Prize, and TRAIN DREAMS was a finalist for the 2012

Pulitzer Prize.

Critical Praise

"Denis Johnson's **Train Dreams** is a sweeping tall tale, an homage to Bret Harte, a work of North American magical realism, a yarn of the supernatural variety, and finally the biography of a widower and hermit, Robert Grainier, who weeps in church, fears his dreams, and dies in 1968 without having used a telephone... Attentiveness to detail gives this story credence, but its greater power lies in its visitations, its haunted moments of sadness and yearning in which the world appears otherworldly and aggrieved even while infused with comedy. I admire this story for its celebratory quality, its skillful blending of forms and traditions, its consistently exquisite use of the English language, and in the end for its emotional appeal."

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