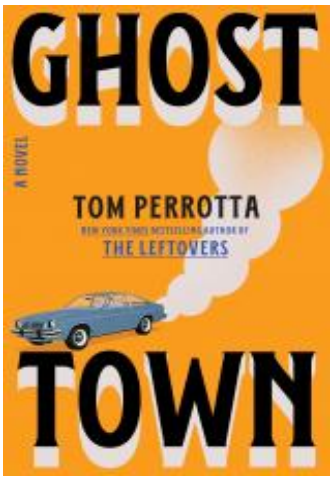
Ghost Town

by Tom Perrotta



About the Book

From *New York Times* bestselling author Tom Perrotta, hailed by critics as ?the Steinbeck of Suburbia? (*Time*), ?our Balzac of the burbs? (*Chicago Sun-Times*), and ?an American Chekhov? (*The New York Times*), comes a gripping and darkly nostalgic tale about a tumultuous summer in 1970s suburban New Jersey from the perspective of a middle-aged writer looking back on a series of events that changed his life --- and the story he finally has the courage to tell.

Jimmy Perrini lives in 1970s suburban New Jersey, a few miles from Manhattan, but a world apart. At the end of eighth grade, after tragedy strikes, Jimmy finds himself lost in a fog of grief that alienates him from friends and family, drifting instead into troubling friendships with two older teenagers. One is a notorious local burnout with a fast car, an endless supply of weed, and a shaky grasp of reality. The other is a smart, eccentric girl, to whom Jimmy finds himself drawn as they become entranced by her Ouija board, which just may offer the only salve to their grief.

As a fateful public drama unfolds, Jimmy is torn between the occult beyond and the cold realities of the place he has called home. Narrated by a much older Jimmy, a literary-turned-commercial novelist, GHOST TOWN reveals how the past haunts the present --- the way our ghosts are always with us, even when we think we?ve left them behind.

Discussion Guide

1. The story begins with Jimmy Perrini receiving an email invitation to return to his childhood home of Creamwood, New Jersey, to honor his late father?s memory with the naming of a new municipal building for him. While the message disturbs Jimmy, it causes him to reflect on that fateful summer of 1974 and the ?bad memories? of his hometown that he had locked away. How does Jimmy?s attitude about his hometown, and his hesitation to return, set up the novel for what took place for him that summer?

2. The community considers the Perrini family to be a respectable, ?normal? one, and ?Normal families were the glue that held the world together.? And yet, the narrator questions his family?s personal dynamic, his unreliable memory, and the town?s morals. How does the novel challenge the ideas of what?s normal and play with memory throughout the story? How does Jimmy?s unreliable childhood memory establish the tone of uncertainty and foreshadow something menacing beneath the surface? What moments reflect this in the story?

3. Discuss Creamwood?s history and what the town was like in 1974. Who were some of its prominent residents, and what was the town?s culture? How has the town changed when Jimmy visits as an adult?

4. At Jimmy?s mother?s funeral, the first of many ?ghosts? in the story are revealed, several of whom play a key part in reflecting Jimmy?s feelings at the time. How do spirits and ghosts operate in this novel? Do you think they?re real or fictional to the characters?

5. Who is Eddie Fitzpatrick? What is Eddie?s reputation in ?town, and why does Jimmy wonder if the summer of ?74 would have been different if he hadn?t gotten into Eddie?s Chevy Vega?

6. Mr. Kazmierski, or Kaz, is described as an easygoing and fun teacher whose only quirk is being a stickler for the Pledge of Allegiance and his vocal patriotism. But how does this description of him differ from the man we see later in the novel, his actions and his beliefs? What hints are there in the story that signify his darker side? Name some of the other characters who are described one way, then show contradictory behavior when their belief systems are challenged.

7. How does each Perrini family member manage grief? How do their individual actions widen their interpersonal relationships in 1974 and later when Jimmy is an adult?

8. Think about Jimmy and Olivia. How does Jimmy?s connection with the Ouija board and his relationship with Olivia reflect his inner state? What does Jimmy hope to gain from trying to communicate with the dead --- and does he succeed? And how does Olivia?s interest in the supernatural reflect her own stress?

9. How do the older teenagers, such as the camp counselors Eddie and Leonard, function in Jimmy?s life as mentors, enablers, dangers, stand-ins for adults, or distractions from his reality?

10. Reflect on the moments in the novel where we jump forward in time to Jimmy?s adulthood. How does Jimmy view his writing career? How does his rewrite of his ?commercial? novel for monetary gain speak to the themes of this story and Jimmy?s childhood summer of 1974?

11. What is Shirley's relationship to Leonard? How does Jimmy?s interaction with them both test his relationship with Eddie, and what does it say about his character?

12. What happens when Jimmy spends an evening with Olivia for the first time? What about the last time? What do we learn about Jimmy and Olivia from these events, and how do they both grow and process their individual childhood grief over the course of their relationship?

13. Who are Wayne, Nilda, Hector and Yvette? Discuss the scene at the Jade Palace and what takes place there with Kaz. How does this scene tie into the fire at Wayne and Nilda?s house, with the town gathered around ?like a block

party.? Who and what do you think started the fire?

14. Adult Jimmy states that he went back to Creamwood for himself. *That?s the dream, right? To look at yourself and be at peace with the person you were and the person you?ve become. The things you were stuck with and the things you got to choose. You can?t just erase the parts you don?t like or hide from the ones that scare you or make you feel ashamed. I wanted to be whole again.* Does Jimmy?s visit to his hometown make him whole by the end of the novel? Why or why not?

15. How does Tom Perrotta comment on the legacy of whitewashing in communities across America during the 1970s? How does that combine with the idea that the ghosts of our past are always with us, even when we think we?ve left them behind? How do these themes reflect the American political climate of today?s times?

Author Bio

Tom Perrotta is the author of 11 works of fiction, including ELECTION and LITTLE CHILDREN, both of which were made into Oscar-nominated films, and THE LEFTOVERS and MRS. FLETCHER, which were adapted into acclaimed HBO series. His new novel is GHOST TOWN.

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