ReadingGroupGuides
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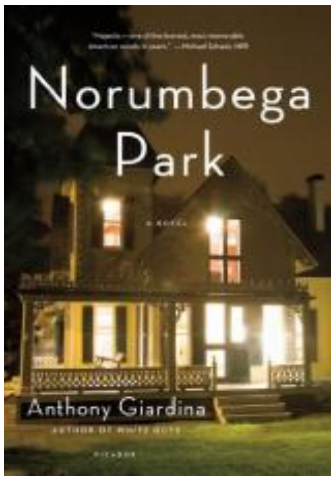
Norumbega Park

by Anthony Giardina



About the Book

Tracing three generations of a striving East Coast family, **Norumbega Park** begins with an all-American quest for real estate. One night in 1969, while driving with his wife and children in the country, Richie Palumbo realizes he is lost. He finds himself in the town of Norumbega, a beautiful historic enclave west of Boston. He spots a magnificent old house and decides he must have it, no matter the cost. The owners don?t want to sell, but he returns, again and again, finally realizing his dream and setting his children on a course far from his own working-class roots. For his wife, Stella, and their children and grandchildren, the house sets the stage for a lifetime of spiritual and emotional odysseys. From the start, their son, Jack, and their daughter, Joan, seem destined to inhabit separate worlds. Jack sees the world as a sexual playground, while Joan craves solitude and prayer. As their fates unravel, **Norumbega Park** becomes a haunting portrait of dreams versus realities --- and the family legacies that shape who we become.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss Richie?s obsession with the Greeley house. What did it represent to him, the son of a Sicilian mason who had not wanted him to go to college? How do the novel?s epigraphs (about the land once called Norumbega) echo Richie?s dream? Is there a similar home or locale in your family history?

2. After leaving ComVac, Richie successfully runs a pizza parlor. Is it a step down for him to leave the white-collar world? How does Stella?s vision of success compare to her husband?s? How are Jack and Joan affected by their parents? expectations?

3. In the closing scene of Part One, ?Mr. Want? (pages 28-29), Jack tries to educate his sister about sex. She responds by writing ?Jack is the devil? in her notebook. What does she learn from him that night?

4. What is the role of sexuality in the characters? lives? How do gender and age affect their longing and their joy, as well

as their sense of guilt?

5. Does Joan?s immersion in the contemplative life appeal to you? What does the church seem to offer her, from the time she was a little girl?

6. Is Elspeth?s father powerful only because he is wealthy? Why is he interested in financing Jack?s future, and in relying on Jack more than on his own children?

7. How does Jack?s attraction to Christina Thayer compare to his desire for Ellen Foley? As a wife and mother, what does Christina discover about herself when she tries to counsel Adam Goldstein (Chapter Two of Part Four, ?The Heart?s Desire to Break?)? How does her marriage look from her point of view?

8. What are Angel and his children able to awaken in Joan that no one else could? How does she respond to the fact that his ancestry is different from hers? Why does race matter to Richie?

9. In Chapter Four of Part Five, ?The Book of Joan? (page 280), Joan struggles to help Richie as they linger outside the house. Anthony Giardina writes, ?This was the hardest, had always been the hardest, the way love was offered when you felt you least deserved it, despised yourself the most, how you had to rise to it. Love, that egomaniacal force, insisted on its rights. He wanted to push her away.? Do the characters in this novel believe they deserve to be loved? Do they overestimate their sins?

10. What relationship patterns are repeated across the generations in **Norumbega Park**? Are Zoe, Joe, and Julian poised to find more satisfaction than their parents had?

11. As Stella confronts mortality, why is Jack determined to find aggressive treatment for her? Is it as simple as wanting his mother to stay in his life? What drew her back to the pediatric unit at the chemotherapy center?

12. How does the setting of Norumbega and its lakes affect the characters? How does it set a different tone compared to the scenes in New York or Boston? What keeps the Palumbos from abandoning the house in Norumbega?

13. What does the novel say about the consequences of the American Dream? Should Richie feel guilty about the tactics he used to buy his dream house? In the end, how does he measure the value of his life?

14. Compare **Norumbega Park** to Anthony Giardina?s previous fiction that you have read. What themes of estrangement and belonging recur in his story lines? What aspects of love and power does his fiction help us understand?

Author Bio

Anthony Giardina is the author of four previous novels, most recently **White Guys**, and one collection of stories. His short fiction and essays have appeared in *Harper?s Magazine*, *Esquire*, *GQ*,and *The New York Times Magazine*, and his plays have been widely produced. He is a regular visiting professor at the Michener Center for Writers of the University of Texas. He lives in Northampton, Massachusetts.

Critical Praise

"**Norumbega Park** is an immensely heartfelt and successful novel: tender, tasteful, intelligent, and touching; rewarding, too, in its insights into the minutiae of suburban, lakeside America; the hollows in people?s lives; illness, suicide, ageing; and the failure of love."

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