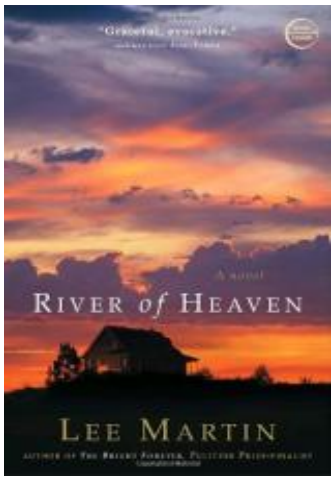
River of Heaven

by Lee Martin



About the Book

?You have to know the rest of my story, the part I can?t yet bring myself to say. A story of a boy I knew a long time ago and a brother I loved and then lost.?

Past and present collide in Lee Martin?s highly anticipated novel of a man, his brother, and the dark secret that both connects and divides them. Haunting and beautifully wrought, **River of Heaven** weaves a story of love and loss, confession and redemption, and the mystery buried with a boy named Dewey Finn.

On an April evening in 1955, Dewey died on the railroad tracks outside Mt. Gilead, Illinois, and the mystery of his death still confounds the people of this small town.

River of Heaven begins some fifty years later and centers on the story of Dewey?s boyhood friend Sam Brady, whose solitary adult life is much formed by what really went on in the days leading up to that evening at the tracks. It?s a story he?d do anything to keep from telling, but when his brother, Cal, returns to Mt. Gilead after decades of self-exile, it threatens to come to the surface.

A Pulitzer Prize finalist for **The Bright Forever**, Lee Martin masterfully conveys, with a voice that is at once distinct and lyrical, one man?s struggle to come to terms with the outcome of his life. Powerful and captivating, **River of Heaven** is about the high cost of living a lie, the chains that bind us to our past, and the obligations we have to those we love.

Discussion Guide

1. What prompts Sam to build a doghouse in the shape of a ship for Stump? Why does Arthur decide to help?

2. When Duncan Hines, reporter for the local *Daily Mail*, shows up to take pictures of the doghouse, how does this begin

to change Sam?s life?

3. After watching the television news report to see the hostage situation at the grain elevator, and knowing his brother is held up at gunpoint inside, what is Sam?s initial reaction? Why do you think he says he?ll ?wait it out? rather than go to his brother?

4. Why, after all these years of self-imposed isolation, does Sam seem to welcome company, even yearn for it?

5. What does Sam find at the yard sale? Explain its significance in the story. Do you think there is a greater symbolism to it?

6. In Chapter 4, Sam reminisces about the last thing his brother said to him before their long estrangement: ?I guess we all have to live the lives we?ve made, but I don?t think I can live mine here, not now.? Do you think Sam has lived the life he?s made? Why did he choose to stay in Mt. Gilead?

7. When Sam first goes with Arthur to the Seasoned Chefs, he says, ?I wish I could trust this feeling I have, this thing rising up in me I can only call joy.? Why can?t Sam trust this feeling?

8. Each of the main characters --- Sam, Arthur, Maddie, and Vera --- has experienced some type of loss. Name them and how each has coped.

9. Why does Arthur lie about Maddie?s mother, saying she?s a methamphetamine user when, in fact, she died of AIDS?

10. Explain the friendship between Sam and his neighbor, Arthur. What does Sam get out of it? How does Arthur view Sammy?

11. At various points in the novel Arthur reminds Sam that he doesn?t know much about family and true love. Why does Arthur feel the need to say those things to Sam? Does he mean to be hurtful?

12. Name the present-day moments throughout the novel that bring up memories of Dewey Finn for both Sam and Cal.

13. Sam tells Vera that he likes the idea of Maddie living with him. How does he feel about her eventually returning to her grandfather?

14. Sam has spent much time thinking about the past. Do you think he has ever contemplated the future? How far ahead does he think?

15. What do you suspect Cal has been doing with himself since the death of Dewey Finn and leaving home to join the Army?

16. After Cal explains the reason he had the drawn-up map of Chicago, Sam goes to bed and has a very profound and significant dream. What happens in it? What does Sam think it means? What is your interpretation?

17. What is the River of Heaven? Do you think it is an appropriate title for the novel?

18. On page 159, Sam says that his father, in 1959, ?had no idea how far love could reach.? Does Sam have any idea himself?

19. Cal says to Sam, on page 165, ?You?re a good man, Sammy. You always have been.? What does this do for Sam?

20. When Cal pulls up in his truck after searching for Stump, what does Sam shout to him? What does Cal do? Why does Sam choose to tell him?

21. When Cal finally reveals that he was part of the militia, how much of his story does Sam believe?

22. On pages 228 and 229, Arthur realizes that ?We touch the world . . . and sooner or later the world touches back.? What does he mean by this? How has the world touched back at him?

23. What was the final story on Cal?s involvement with Herbert Zwilling? Why do you think the FBI investigator would rather have this explanation over the plans to blow up the Sears Tower?

24. Upon learning that Cal has died, what is Sam?s reaction?

25. Do you think there was a real chance for Sam to save Dewey?

26. What do you think Vera?s and Maddie?s reactions to Sam?s confession will be? How about Nancy Finn? Do you think she?s had a long suspicion that he was somehow involved in Dewey?s death?

27. What has finally telling his story about the night Dewey died done for Sam?

Author Bio

Lee Martin is the author of such novels as THE BRIGHT FOREVER, a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. His writing has appeared in numerous publications, including *Harper?s*, *Ms Magazine*, *The Georgia Review* and *The Kenyon Review*, and his work has been anthologized in *The Best American Essays* and *The Best American Mystery Stories*. His books have been widely translated and won many awards, including a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers award. He teaches in the MFA Program at The Ohio State University.

Critical Praise

?In **River of Heaven**, Lee Martin has created that rare thing: a literary page-turner. This is a story about the corrosive power of a childhood secret, and the way our lives are shaped as much by what we withold as what we reveal. An elegantly structured, powerful and original novel, full of heart.?

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