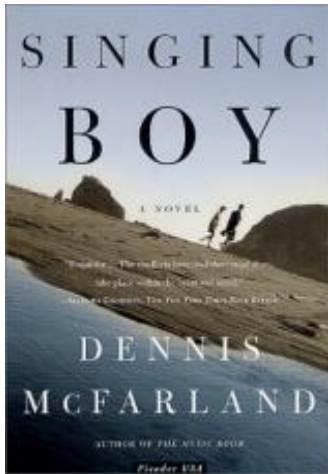


# Singing Boy: A Novel

by Dennis McFarland

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## About the Book

At the outset of this moving, luminous novel, Malcolm Vaughn, a successful architect in suburban Boston, is shot and killed in a random act of violence, an act witnessed by his wife Sarah and young son Harry. Sarah's grief in the prolonged aftermath of this horrid act is total and totally devastating. She is unsure of how to return to work, how to talk to policemen and teachers, how to live in a world that does not include her husband. Her grief is the primary dramatic action of this book; the reader learns human and emotional truths from the example of her catharsis. Harry, her bright, artistic eight-year-old son, is by contrast more grounded and functional in his sadness, although Sarah begins to wonder (as does the reader) if and when the boy might lose his grasp. And then there is Deckard-the best friend Malcolm left behind, a Vietnam vet, and a comforting presence to not only Sarah and Harry but several other characters. The reader is also comforted by Deck, who is friendly, generous, and rich in the wisdom of experience. But when Deck finds himself wrestling with both the strengths and shortcomings of his own memories, grief turns to panic as the narrative races to an engrossing resolution. **Singing Boy** is a vivid, perceptive, character-driven family tragedy, a story about the depths of sorrow, the mysteries of fate, and the personal as well as communal paths people must travel as they face these depths and mysteries.

## Discussion Guide

1. **Singing Boy** begins with a senseless, deplorable act of violence that sets the story in motion. A crime has been committed, but author Dennis McFarland's narrative is only remotely concerned with solving it. Why? Apart from the initial crime, identify the key questions or mysteries confronted by the book's main characters. How, if at all, are they answered or resolved?
2. Although the narration of the novel is in the third person, nearly all the events that transpire are rendered from one of three different perspectives. Whose perspectives are these? Also, how do these shifting perspectives-and the book's

frequent switching of verb tense-reflect the mental, emotional, and psychological states of the characters themselves?

3. Why does Sarah refuse to visit a therapist? Her mother thinks it might be a good idea, but Sarah cannot be persuaded. Is Sarah being stubborn here, or does she have other reasons (and if so, what are they)?

4. Consider the character of Harry, the "singing boy" of this tale. Given the trauma he is experiencing, how do his thoughts, speech, and behavior reflect his young age?

5. If Sarah's foremost personal burden is grief (the long, dark maze of sorrow that comprises the main plot of the novel), and Deckard's is memory (either the unwanted kind or the vanishing kind), then what might be Harry's? Identify important imagery and dialogue from the text in support of your response.

6. Discuss the relationship between Sarah and Detective Sanders. How does it change over the course of the book? How does Sarah's overall view of the police change? And how, if at all, did reading this book alter your own view of police work--the nature of it, the routine of it, the reality of it, and so forth?

7. Although Sarah has acted selfishly and stubbornly--as she herself realizes and admits--during so much of her grieving, she becomes convinced, about two-thirds of the way through the narrative, that she and Harry must retreat to her family's summer home. Neither Deckard nor Harry's principal consider this a wise move, but Sarah does it anyway. Why is she so adamant about making this trip? Be as specific as you can. And was it the right thing to do? Explain.

8. Toward the end of the novel, Deckard tells Harry about the "single question that saved [Deckard's] life." What exactly is this question? Who asked it, and why did it prove so potent, so fateful? And why is it significant that Deckard is now telling Harry of this secret question?

9. In one interview, discussing the manner in which he wrote this book, McFarland remarked: "I had to balance the grieving with some amount of wit. It's true to life that even in the depths of despair something will happen that will make us laugh." Cite places in the text where this is true.

10. Finally, how would you evaluate this novel as a portrayal of grief? If possible, refer to your own experiences of mourning, or those of someone close to you, to address the delicate subject matter of **Singing Boy**--and how this subject is handled by the author. Did the novel thus strike you as accurate and/or convincing? Explain why or why not.

## Author Bio

Dennis McFarland is the bestselling author of **The Music Room**, **School for the Blind** and **A Face At The Window**. His fiction has appeared in *Best American Short Stories* and *The New Yorker*. He lives with his family in Massachusetts.

## Critical Praise

"Hypnotic . . . [A] beautiful gasp of a book."

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