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The World Made Straight

by Ron Rash



About the Book

Travis Shelton is 17 the summer he wanders into the woods onto private property outside his North Carolina hometown, discovers a grove of marijuana large enough to make him some serious money, and steps into the jaws of a bear trap. After hours of passing in and out of consciousness, Travis is discovered by Carlton Toomey, the wise and vicious farmer who set the trap to protect his plants, and Travis?s confrontation with the subtle evils within his rural world has begun.

Before long, Travis has moved out of his parents? home to live with Leonard Shuler, a one-time schoolteacher who lost his job and custody of his daughter years ago, when he was framed by a vindictive student. Now Leonard lives with his dogs and his sometime girlfriend in a run-down trailer outside town, deals a few drugs, and studies journals from the Civil War. Travis becomes his student, of sorts, and the fate of these two outsiders becomes increasingly entwined as the community?s terrible past and corrupt present bear down on each of them from every direction, leading to a violent reckoning --- not only with Toomey, but with the legacy of the Civil War massacre that, even after a century, continues to divide an Appalachian community.

Vivid, harrowing yet ultimately hopeful, THE WORLD MADE STRAIGHT is Ron Rash?s subtlest exploration yet of the painful conflict between the bonds of home and the desire for independence.

Discussion Guide

1. Each chapter in the novel ends with an entry from the doctor?s journal. How does the information in the entries relate to the events of the present-day story? Did they change your understanding of the events at Shelton Laurel and their significance to Travis, Leonard, Toomey and the other characters in the novel?

2. ?The boy had stirred up all sorts of things inside Leonard that he?d thought safely locked in the past.? (pg. 51) What is it about Travis that stirs these things in Leonard? What do the two men have in common when they meet that draws

them together? In the end, considering all that happens by the end of the story, do you think they?re better off for having met?

3. Carlton Toomey, for all his brutality, is an eminently rational man with his own ideas about right and wrong. What do you think motivates him? Did you find him to be a sympathetic character at any point in the story?

4. When the two of them first visit Shelton Laurel, (pg. 86) Leonard tells Travis that ?you know a place is haunted when it feels more real than you are,? and Travis agrees. Why do you think Shelton Laurel feels more real to these men than their own lives? How does their susceptibility to the past, the ghosts and the legacy of the war, change by the end of the novel?

5. Travis? first confrontation with the Toomeys leads directly to his moving out of his parents? house, moving in with Leonard, and beginning to learn about the Civil War and the larger world. What do you think is the connection between these events in his mind? What would do you think would have happened to Travis in the coming years if he hadn?t stepped in the bear trap on the Toomey?s property?

6. What is the significance of the book?s epigraph, from MOBY DICK? What does it say about the relationship between good and evil in the novel?

7. Why does Leonard plead guilty to the charges in Illinois? Look at his conversation with Kera (pg. 156); which of her explanations for his actions seems right? What do you think he should have done? Despite his crimes and his weakness, did you find Leonard to be a sympathetic character?

8. Why do you think Dena decides to go with Toomey (pg. 176)? Do you think Leonard should have stopped her?

9. After leaving his family dinner and confronting his father (pg. 234), Travis spurns Lori, drops her off, and begins the rampage that will lead to Leonard?s death as well as Toomey?s. Aside from his anger at his father, what is driving Travis on that night? How is his anger connected to what he?s learned from Leonard? Is his attempt to save Dena and punish Toomey a sign of progress, of bravery, or just a regression?

10. ?Landscape is destiny,? Leonard remarks at one point in the story. How does the landscape where these characters live affect their lives in this story, their relationships and their ideas about the world? How might your own life be different if you had grown up, or lived now, in a drastically different landscape?

11. In a conversation with Shank during the early days of his lessons with Leonard, Travis decides not to tell his old friend everything he?s been worrying about, and instead thinks to himself that ?words ruin everything? (pg. 142). How do you reconcile Travis? excitement about learning with his frustration with language? How does the conflict between words and actions come into play elsewhere in this novel?

12. Look at page 159, where Leonard is listening to Handel?s *Messiah.* ?Even the words proclaimed an order,? he thinks. ?*The crookedness of the world made straight.*? Why do you think the author has chosen this as the title?

Author Bio

Ron Rash is the author of the PEN/Faulkner finalist and *New York Times* bestselling novel SERENA, in addition to the critically acclaimed novels THE RISEN, ABOVE THE WATERFALL, THE COVE, ONE FOOT IN EDEN, SAINTS AT THE RIVER, and THE WORLD MADE STRAIGHT; four collections of poems; and seven collections of stories, among them BURNING BRIGHT, which won the 2010 Frank O?Connor International Short Story Award, NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY, a *New York Times* bestseller, and CHEMISTRY AND OTHER STORIES, which was a finalist for the 2007 PEN/Faulkner Award. Three times the recipient of the O. Henry Prize, his books have been translated into 17 languages. He teaches at Western Carolina University.

Critical Praise

"An intellectually satisfying work of suspense?Reminds us of the sort of compelling literature a brave artist can fashion from the shards of such experience."

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