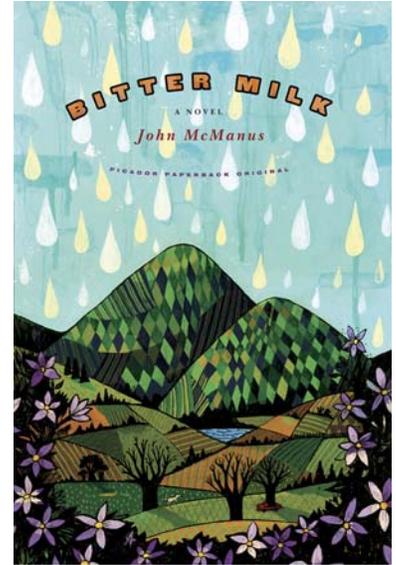


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Bitter Milk*

by *John McManus*



ISBN: 0-312-30193-6

### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Bitter Milk* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Bitter Milk*.

### About the Book

From the Whiting Award-winning writer John McManus comes a debut novel of startling originality and mystery. The son of an unknown father and an ostracized mother, and the next of kin in a long line of bastard relatives, nine-year-old Loren Garland lives a life of subtle mystery beneath the shadow of an East Tennessee mountain. It is on his family's broken-down estate that Loren's imagination grows, and with it, the extraordinary voice of *Bitter Milk*, a young boy named Luther who may be Loren's imaginary friend, his conscience, or his evil twin. And yet outside the puzzle of Loren's brain, there are the darker goings-on of his family -- his mother who wishes she were a man, his new uncle who plans to develop the Garland land into real estate, and his withered grandfather who holds the clan together through truculence and fear. When Loren's mother disappears, he must set out on a quest of his own devising, tossing aside the trappings of youth in order to discover the truth of the world.

"An impressive follow-up on his two striking collections of stories, the brilliant, mordant *Bitter Milk* consolidates John McManus's place as one of the most powerful and original American writers of the twenty-first century."

--Madison Smartt Bell, author of *The Stone that the Builder Refused*

"This mysterious, almost phantasmagoric, debut novel is reminiscent of Cormac McCarthy's *The Orchard Keeper* in its precociousness. McManus writes with a wisdom and empathy that belies his youth. *Bitter Milk* signals the arrival of an important new voice in Southern literature."

--Ron Rash, author of *One Foot in Eden* and *Saints at the River*

“The narrative moves toward a kind of liberation....The result is a densely atmospheric, propulsive tale.”

--Kirkus Reviews

“From the first page...the story moves along like a fast-moving train.”

--The Knoxville News Sentinel

"A first novel of originality and a dazzling intensity...Weird, funny, and poignant, *Bitter Milk* is one of the most distinctive novels of the season. Although part of the tradition of great, dysfunctional Southern fictions, it is in the end entirely itself."

--Michael Barnard, Rakestraw Books, Danville, CA

## About the Author

John McManus was born in Knoxville and raised in Maryville, Tennessee. The author of the collections *Born on a Train* and *Stop Breakin' Down*, he became the youngest ever recipient of the Whiting Writers' Award in 2000. He currently divides his time between Tennessee and Austin, Texas.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why do you believe Loren Garland's family hides so much from him, and furthermore, why do you think he is more curious about these mysteries than other children?
2. The novel is structured along two quests, both connected: the puzzle or mystery of the world around Loren (what is happening to the Garland family? What occurred in the past? Where did Loren's mother go? Why does she not love him the way he wishes to be loved?) and the puzzle of Loren's brain (Who is Luther and why does he drift in and out of narrating the story?). Why does every one of these questions seem to lead back to Loren's mother?
3. Who, in fact, is Luther?
4. Furthermore, what biblical overtones are implied in his name and his possible origin? What biblical overtones resonate throughout the novel as a whole?
5. Is Mr. Ownby more than he appears to be? Why does he seem care for Loren? How are the two of them – man and boy – similar?
6. In what ways does this world old-fashioned, in what ways does it seem modern, and what is the author trying to say about Appalachia and the South by showing this world to be so anachronistic?
7. Though Loren is only 9 years old, he has questions about his sexuality? Is he attracted to Eli, or does he just wish to be him? Most importantly, does Loren indeed hate himself? How much of his uncertainty is connected to his mother's struggles with sexuality?
8. What is the meaning of the book's title?
9. What does Chilhowee Mountain symbolize for Loren?

10. The letter at the end of the book: what sort of closure does it provide for Loren? What sort of closure does it provide for you, the reader?

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