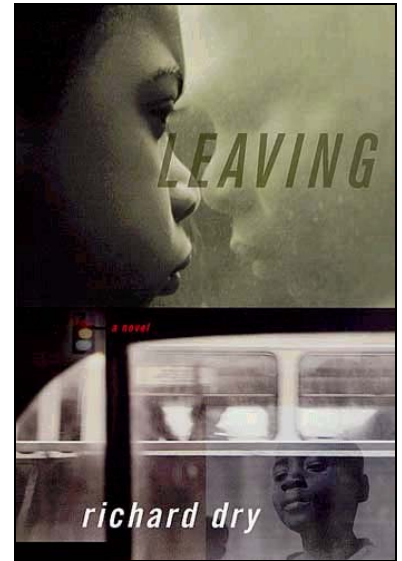


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *Leaving* by Richard Dry

St. Martin's Press

ISBN: 0-312-28331-8 (hardcover)



### Introduction to *Leaving*

An epic, engrossing first novel of an African-American family, its dispossession and regeneration.

*Leaving* begins in 1959, when newly-widowed and pregnant Ruby Washington and her half brother, Easton, board a bus in rural South Carolina destined for California. Their lives and the lives of Ruby's daughter Lida and her children Love and Li'l Pit are played out against the turbulent backdrop of the 1960s and the drug-infested neighborhoods of the 1980s and 1990s. Ruby and Lida struggle to embrace each other without disturbing the family secret that eventually drives Lida into prostitution; Easton grows into a charismatic community leader without control over his own inner world; and Love attempts to rescue his brother from the inhospitable streets of America.

Leaving places, leaving family, and leaving the prisms of racism and poverty-this debut novel is a remarkable synthesis of history and intimately-observed everyday life.

### In His Own Words

#### What was the inspiration for *Leaving*?

The most obvious inspiration for my book was my work as a Senior Mental Health Assistant with severely emotionally disturbed kids, both in a group home and in a residential day treatment center. In the process of working at this institution, I was punched, kicked, spat upon, and had my nose broken. However, after more positive contact, I came to care about the kids who unfailingly had one thing in common: a family history of abuse or neglect. Through my interactions with the children and my study of their personal histories, I came to appreciate the forces that went into forging such frightened and angry human beings. I wanted to tell their stories, and, being that there was a disproportionate number

of African-American children in this facility, a story grew from a seed that had been planted in me a long time ago.

When I was young, I had been cared for by a Black woman named Ruby. She was my closest friend and she thought of me, I found out when visiting her siblings in South Carolina years after her death, as her own son. She would literally say to them, "Look at what my son Richard sent me from California." In addition, my mother had a number of Black friends in Philadelphia, where I was raised, and a number of them took a liking to me. I remember, in particular, two men with whom we spent many hours in Ritten House Square: Mellow and Shawn. It was the late sixties and I slowly became aware of the segregation of the races and the economic disparity. I recall becoming acutely aware of certain restaurants and stores that had few if any Black customers. I noticed how workers in subservient positions were commonly Black while their supervisors were White.

When I try to account for my outrage, I think about my own experiences as a long-haired little boy who was often treated like a girl. Or perhaps the ensuing divorce of my parents created in me an empathy for those who were treated unfairly or seemed to be victims of circumstance.

As I traveled the country with my single mother, living in half a dozen states before I was 8, I was always struck by the disparity between Black and White neighborhoods and also fascinated by the cultural differences that seemed to be borne of segregation. My work with the homeless and later with emotionally disturbed kids was no doubt an outgrowth of these formative years. I was driven to understand why such inequality existed and researched the historical factors linking slavery and the present circumstances of many African-Americans - disproportionately living in poverty, in prison, and in pain. By the time I became a college instructor, working in a program with African-American students, I became aware of the large segment of our population, of all ethnicities, with little sense of these historical factors. But I was also aware that textbooks were of no interest to most people. I was driven to dramatize this territory, and by creating composite characters from friends, historical figures, and the children with whom I'd worked, I wove together a story I believed would allow my readers and myself to experience the psychological and social inheritance of slavery and bigotry.

### **Who are your favorite authors? Which authors have influenced your book?**

My favorite authors, all of whom influenced this book in some way - in style, content, or aesthetic - include André Malraux, John Steinbeck, Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Charles Dickens, George Orwell, Ursula K. LeGuin, Richard Wright, Milan Kundera, Flannery O'Connor, Alice Munro, Jonathan Kozal, John Irving, Claude Brown, Richard Bausch, Richard Bach, James Baldwin, Ingmar Bergman, Eugene O'Neil, Sophocles, Harold Pinter, GB Shaw, Robert Frost, Langston Hughes, T.S. Eliot, ee cummings, Allen Ginsberg, Sharon Olds, Robert Hunter, Joni Mitchell, and Bob Dylan.

Additional authors who influenced this book include Ralph Ellison, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X (through Alex Haley), Alice Walker, Elaine Brown, Eldridge Cleaver, Kweisi Mfume, and Léon Bing, among others.

## **Reading Group Guide Questions**

1. How does the structure of *Leaving* contribute to the themes explored in the novel?
2. What do the characters attempt to leave in this novel other than physical places? Can the act of leaving be applied to historical and psychological contexts?
3. To what degree are the characters successful or unsuccessful at leaving?

4. What role do the slave narratives and historical documents play in the book? Look at each Santa Rita chapter and discuss the relationship it has to the development of the characters, plot, and themes?
5. What does the intersection of the personal and the historical say about the confluence of individual and societal responsibility?
6. Is the race of the author significant? Why or why not? Does the same apply to gender?
7. What issues about relationships and self-knowledge apply to the human condition regardless of race?
8. Consider a particular passage in which Dry uses description to create emotional impact. How is emotion conveyed through physical detail?
9. How does Lida's relationship with Ruby parallel Love Easton Childer's relationship with Elise?
10. How does Love LeRoy's relationship to his brother, Li'l Pit, reflect his notions of responsibility and manhood?
11. What is the connection between Love Easton's sense of self and his relationships with female characters?
12. What differences exist between Love and Li'l Pit and how do they contribute to their development?
13. What differences and similarities exist between Joyce and Love?
14. Who is the person reading and speaking in the Santa Rita chapters? What significance does it have?
15. How do the characters undermine traditional notions of good and evil?
16. In what ways do the epigrams reflect themes in the novel?

## About the Author

**Richard Dry** is an English instructor for the Las Positas-Chabot Community College District and a former Mental Health Assistant working with emotionally disturbed youth. This novel won the Joseph Henry Jackson Award from the San Francisco Foundation and Intersection for the Arts and was nominated for the Pushcart editors' Prize. Richard Dry lives with his wife in California.