

READING GROUP GUIDE

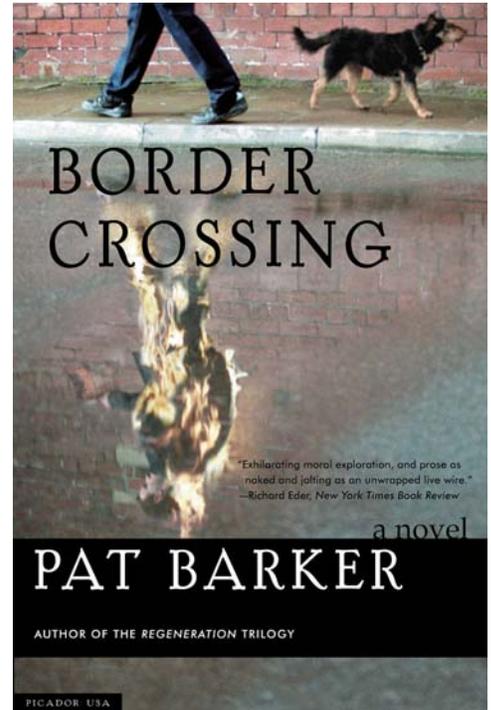
Border Crossing

A Novel

by Pat Barker

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About this Guide

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

About the Book

As this dark, fast, and chilling novel begins, Tom Seymour, a clinical psychiatrist specializing in violent children, rescues a young man who has fallen into the river near Tom's home in northern England. The young man turns out to be Danny Miller, whom Tom met in a professional capacity thirteen years earlier, when Danny was only ten. In fact, Tom had testified at Danny's murder trial—and it was his expert opinion that effectively put Danny behind bars. Now Danny is back in Tom's life, but this reunion really a coincidence? And was Tom correct in affirming, all those years ago, that Danny knew right from wrong, knew the implications of his actions, and knew he was committing murder? And what exactly does Danny want from Tom, now that Tom has agreed to help him sort out his troubled past? *Border Crossing* is a disturbing yet subtle

psychological thriller that explores the nature of evil, the possibility of redemption, and the often overlapping problems of truth and identity.

Praise

“A sparse, headstrong writer whose style is bulletproof modern... [*Border Crossing* is] chilling and psychologically persuasive... [Barker’s] unadorned prose delivers a punch when you’re not looking... as frightening as it wise.”—Gail Caldwell, *Boston Sunday Globe*

“Barker creates a sense of menace worthy of Ian McEwan... *Border Crossing* is replete with sharp, expressive exchanges, hard poetry, and as many enigmas as implacable truths.”—Kerry Fried, *The Atlantic Monthly*

“Barker can tell a story with the verve of a seasoned mystery writer. But she’s too keen an analyst to settle for sensationalism. It’s the canny feel for the psyche’s ambiguous meanderings, more than plots twists, that generates most of the thrills... This author creates an atmosphere of menace worthy of Joyce Carol Oates.”—Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

“A smart whodunit... The prose strikes a good balance between sharp dialogue and powerful exposition... The story moves forward, makes a good read, and deals with important issues in the current legal arena. The wide spectrum of views kept my mind moving and reevaluating.”—Barbara Esstman, *The Washington Post Book World*

“Barker’s is an extraordinary achievement... She manages to be down to earth, poetic, and thrilling, all in the same paragraph... This is a book that never loosens its grip.”—Gabriele Annan, *The New York Review of Books*

“The Turn of the Screw meets The Bad Seed in Pat Barker’s intense psychological thriller... Riveting... Barker soars to new heights with his harrowing, contemporary study of fate tainted by the stench of evil.”—Robert Allen Papinchak, *USA Today*

“Brilliant.”—Susan Hall-Balduf, *Detroit Free Press*

About the Author

Pat Barker was born in Thornaby-on-Tees, England, in 1943. She was educated at the London School of Economics and has been a teacher of history and politics. Her previous books include *Union Street* (1982), which won the Fawcett Prize and was filmed as *Stanley and Iris*; *Blow Your House Down* (1984); *Liza’s England* (1986, formerly *The Century’s Daughter*); *The Man Who Wasn’t There* (1989); her highly acclaimed *Regeneration* trilogy, comprising *Regeneration* (1991), which was made into a film of the same name, *The Eye in the Door* (1993), which won the *Guardian* Fiction Prize, and *The Ghost Road* (1995), which won the Booker Prize; and *Another World* (1998). Pat Barker is married and lives in Durham, England.

Discussion Questions

1. At the outset of *Border Crossing*, an act of rescue occurs—or so it would seem. Identify both of the primary characters in the novel, explaining where and when they originally met as well as how and why they are reunited. How is this rescue metaphor—be it coincidental or intended—present throughout the story? Who are the book’s hero and villain?
2. Give the personal problems he is facing—his failing marriage and imminent divorce, his difficult dealings with his mother in the wake of his father’s death—why does Tom Seymour agree to resume his sessions with Danny Miller, albeit in an unofficial way? Now that it’s been over a decade since their last contact, what does Tom hope to do for Danny—and for himself?
3. *Border Crossing* is a tale of suspense that plays on both the real and imaginary workings of the minds of the characters—and the mind of the reader. Which scenes or aspects of the novel struck you as psychologically thrilling? Which did not? Explain your answers with citations from the narrative. Also, explain which passages, if any, seemed especially funny to you. How well does humor fit in the make-up of this novel? Or does it even belong here? Defend your response.
4. The character of Danny is depicted, by necessity, in several different ways: would-be suicide, charming young man, confused child, and so on. But how does Danny see himself? As a reformed criminal, for instance, a victim of child abuse, or otherwise? Discuss the impressions of Danny offered by the novel’s secondary characters, such as Martha Pitt, Nigel Lewis, Mr. and Mrs. Greene, and Angus MacDonald. Based on these descriptions, and on Tom’s past and present sessions with him, construct a psychological and emotional composite of Danny.
5. Apart from his concerns with Danny, Tom has a professional project that requires his time and effort. Describe the book he is working on. How does Tom’s book echo the larger themes of *Border Crossing*, and Danny’s case in particular.
6. In Chapter Six, during one of their informal sessions, Danny puts the following to Tom pointblank: “You see the real question is: can people change?” How does Tom answer this question? Would Danny answer it differently? If so, how? And how does the novel itself answer this query? Explain how the dual themes of evil and redemption run throughout this narrative.
7. In an interview with Salon.com, author Pat Barker spoke about how her novel reflects recent violent crimes committed by children in both America and her native England: “When children do something like this it creates a feeling of despair about the future.” Describe how this sentiment is rendered in the pages of *Border Crossing*. Did your view of violent children and/or society’s punishment of them change after reading the book? If so, or if not, explain why.
8. Think back to Tom’s childhood memory (in Chapter Five) of a boy named Neil. Why does this particular memory come back to Tom, and how does it relate to Danny’s case?
9. Describe the vision Tom has when he closes his eyes in the book’s final scene. Who does he see? Why is it significant that Danny has also had this vision? Comment on how and

why Tom and Danny's identities and individual histories are blurred throughout this story.

10. Why do you think Barker chose to call her narrative *Border Crossing*? Discuss the various notions or meanings suggested by the title of this novel.

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