

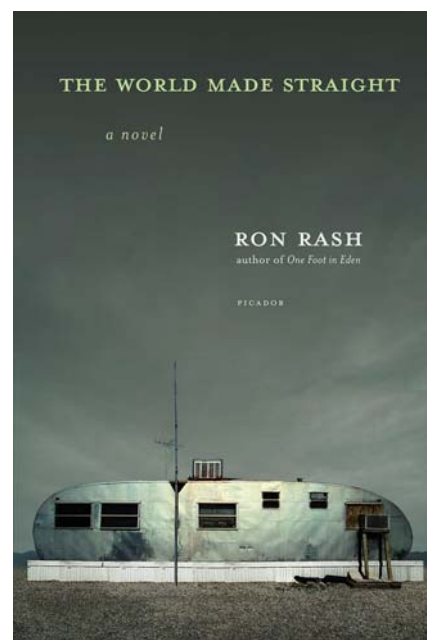
READING GROUP GUIDE

The World Made Straight A Novel

by Ron Rash

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The World Made Straight* 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 *The World Made Straight*.

About the Book

Travis Shelton is seventeen 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 on the forest floor, he's released from the trap--but he can no longer ignore the subtle evils that underlie the life of his small Appalachian community.

Before long, Travis has moved out of his parents' home to live with Leonard Shuler, a one-time schoolteacher who now deals a little pot to make ends meet. Travis becomes his student, of sorts, and the fate of these two outsiders becomes increasingly entwined as the community's violent past and corrupt present bear down on each of them from every direction.

“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.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“A superb tale of redemption and healing . . . Vividly enriched by clear, concise prose . . . A beautifully rendered palimpsest.”

—*BookPage*

“Finely wrought . . . Vivid.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“[Ron Rash's] novels are complex and compelling, told in graceful, conscientious prose, and *The World Made Straight* is his finest yet.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*

About the Author

Ron Rash is the author of the novels *Chemistry and Other Stories*, *One Foot in Eden* and *Saints at the River*, as well as three collections of poetry and two of short stories. He teaches at Western Carolina State University.

Discussion Questions

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 (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 has the author chosen this as the title?

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