



Reading Group Gold

Night Country

by Stewart O’Nan

“O’Nan does in 229 pages what it takes most horror novelists volumes to do — make a clear point. With one foot in the genre of horror-supernatural and the other in literary fiction, this book defies classification.”
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

About the Book

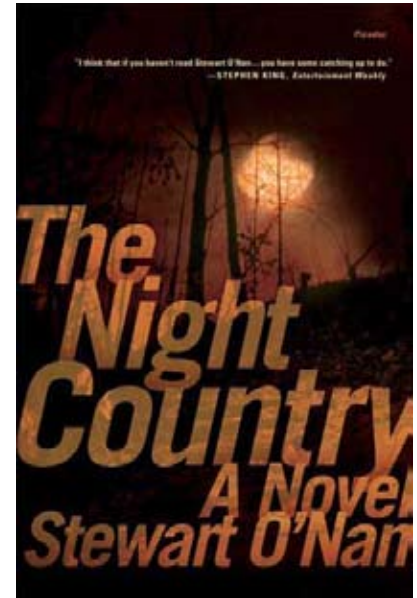
At Midnight on Halloween in a cloistered New England suburb, a car carrying five teenagers leaves a winding road and slams into a tree, killing three of them. One escapes unharmed, another suffers severe brain damage. A year later, summoned by the memories of those closest to them, the three that died come back on a last chilling mission among the living.

A strange and unsettling ghost story in the tradition of Ray Bradbury and Shirley Jackson, *The Night Country* creeps through the leaf-strewn streets and quiet cul-de-sacs of one bedroom community, reaching into the desperately connected yet isolated lives of three people changed forever by the accident: Tim, who survived yet lost everything; Brooks, the cop whose guilty secret has destroyed his life; and Kyle’s mom, trying to love the new son the doctors returned to her. As the day wanes and darkness falls, one of them puts a terrible plan into effect, and they find themselves caught in a collision of need and desire, watched over by the knowing ghosts.

Macabre and moving, *The Night Country* elevates every small town’s bad high school crash into myth, finding the deeper human truth beneath a shared and very American tragedy. As in his highly-prized *Snow Angels* and *A Prayer for the Dying*, once again Stewart O’Nan gives us an intimate look at people trying to hold on to hope, and the consequences when they fail.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Marco is chosen to narrate the story of he and his friends’ return to Avon?
2. What do you believe is the purpose for the many cultural references – store names, brand names, movies and music – throughout *The Night Country*?



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3. On page 26, it is said of Tim, “It isn’t so much that he wants to die as not exist like this anymore.” Do you believe this statement to be true? And furthermore, what is it that Tim actually wants?
4. Also of Tim: “He used to have Danielle, now he has Kyle.” (p. 30) What are the dynamics of Tim and Kyle’s current relationship? In other words, why do you think Tim become the friend that he is to Kyle? See, in particular, the scene towards the close of the novel on page 208.
5. Just as there are two Kyle’s in this book, there seems to be a split in the reaction to his survival (also, perhaps, in reaction to the accident itself). It’s said of Kyle, “Everyone wanted him to get better, everyone wanted him to die.” (p. 113) What does the author, or Marco as the narrator, mean by this statement?
6. Why does Tim’s “plan” go unsaid for throughout the course of the book?
7. Discuss the term “the justice of his own ruin,” in reference to Brooks? Is he a man destroyed, undone, or reinvented by guilt? Was the teenagers’ deaths just a catalyst for a failure that he already carried within him?
8. Why are we given the story of Travis and Greg (Toe’s friends)?
9. On page 170, Brooks looks at Tim as though he were “a father spying on a son.” What does this imply about Brooks’ connection to Tim? Is there an obligation deeper than protection that he feels toward the boy?
10. “We’re visitors here,” it’s said of Marco, Danielle, and Toe. “Our powers are limited.” And yet we’re also told that they’ve returned to Avon on a mission, to affect some sort of change. How can their intentions be both empirical and active?
11. *The Night Country* is a ghost story in many ways. But more forcefully communicated than all else is the fact that the characters in the book are haunted by who they were before the accident. But not Kyle. Other than his brain damage, why?

About the Author

STEWART O’NAN’s novels include *A Good Wife*, *Snow Angels*, *A World Away*, and *A Prayer for the Dying*, among others. Granta has named him one of the Twenty Best Young American Novelists. He lives with his family in Connecticut.

Praise for *Night Country*

A Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Best Book of 2003



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Critical Acclaim for *Century's Son*

"I think that if you haven't read Stewart O'Nan . . . you have some catching up to do." —Stephen King, *Entertainment Weekly*

"[O'Nan invests] each scene, even the most trivial, with genuine emotional resonance.... Beneath its supernatural trappings, *The Night Country* is a painstaking examination of the effect of random, meaningless tragedies on everyday people.... O'Nan has written a ghost story that deliberately subverts the conventions of the genre.... The result, while not easy to categorize, is satisfying and complex: a seamless merger of the fantastic and realistic that addresses universal human concerns, illuminating questions of guilt, grief, loss and obsession with great – and unsparing – fidelity." —*The Washington Post Book World*

"Inspired... So many writers and filmmakers have used suburbia as a condescending shorthand for banality and stupidity that it's a pleasure to read a novel that understands both the freedom that suburban life... offers teenagers, and the way they rail against the constrictions of it... *The Night Country* is the work of a sensitive writer with a genuine talent for investing the plainness of everyday life with straightforward lyricism." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"Stewart O'Nan is a literary ventriloquist. Each of his novels is so different that he seems capable of doing anything he chooses." —Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

"[O'Nan] upholds his reputation in this rigorously contemporary tale of life and death, in which he renders small-town strip malls as eerie as any haunted castle." —*The Seattle Times*

"There are few things Stewart O'Nan can't do, but the list of things he can do goes on for pages. Granta put him in the top 20 [Best Young American Novelists]; I'd put him in the top 10." —*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Chilling... By juxtaposing the angst of teenage years with the hoarier dread of middle age, O'Nan has put his finger on how frightening and swift is the hand of fate." —*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

"Stewart O'Nan has staked out his own claim in the American Gothic tradition." —*Fangoria*

"O'Nan has...[an] extraordinary ability to enter the lives of a diverse spectrum of people." —*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*