

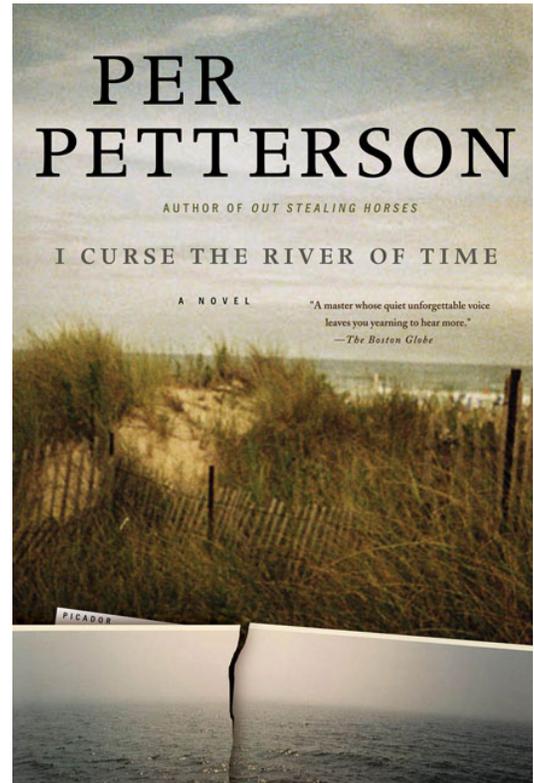
# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *I Curse the River of Time*

*A Novel*

by Per Petterson

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### About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *I Curse the River of Time* 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 *I Curse the River of Time*.

### About the Book

It's 1989 and "three monumental events twine around one another in Arvid Jansen's penumbral soul. His fifteen-year marriage is dissolving, his mother is dying of cancer, and the Berlin Wall is

tumbling down. The parallels are obvious—worlds are ending, internally and externally—but the analogies Petterson draws among these dramatic endings are not....*I Curse the River of Time* is a little like the starker reaches of the West, a little like the stonier shores of Maine, a little like Edward Hopper, a little like Raymond Carver....There is a quality that I can only call charm, or something like charm, to Petterson’s essentially dark and lonely sensibility....It exerts a gravitational pull on the reader” (Stacey D’Erasmus, *The New York Times Book Review*).

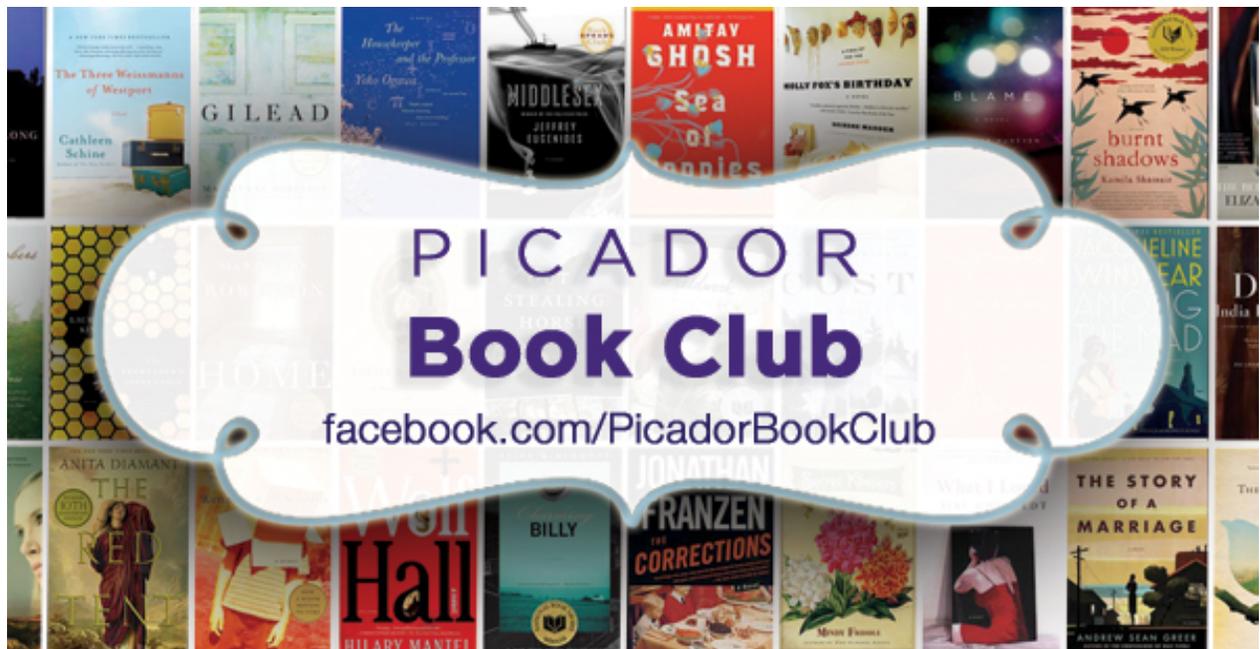
## About the Author

**Per Petterson** won the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for his novel *Out Stealing Horses*, which has been translated into more than thirty languages and was named a Best Book of 2007 by the *New York Times*, *TIME*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and many other publications. He lives in Norway.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why does Arvid’s mother want to go back to Denmark alone?
2. The novel makes many references to American popular culture (Marlon Brando) and classic literature (Maugham’s *The Razor’s Edge*); how do these references illuminate the feelings and personalities of the characters? What makes the Calvados liquor so special to Arvid and his mother?
3. Arvid states near the beginning of the novel that he is helpless in his fight against depression. Does Arvid suffer from a clinical condition? Is he blameless, or do you think he might be in some way responsible for his state?
4. What is the significance of the supposedly hostile man on the boat, who later turns out to be Arvid’s old friend Mogens? Does their encounter shed light on Arvid’s powers of perception and his state of mind? Can he be trusted? Also, how does this scene relate to Arvid’s altercation with the man on the train in his younger years?
5. What attracts Arvid to Communism? How deeply felt are his beliefs, and how do they change?
6. What would you say is the primary wedge between Arvid and his mother? Could it be his decision to go to the factories instead of college? What does Arvid believe? Why does his mother tell her friend Ingrid at the end, “I wouldn’t call him a grown-up”?
7. The title of the novel comes from a poem by Mao. What draws Arvid to such a tragic verse so early in his life? How does it become a haunting prediction?

8. What does the act of chopping down the tree mean to Arvid? How does his mother react?
9. Arvid muses that he wishes his parents had not told him that he was the “wanted” child of his family. How does this pronouncement stigmatize him throughout his life, and why is he so fixated on feeling wanted throughout the novel?
10. Since it is not explicitly stated, do you think the young girl with whom Arvid has a relationship in his youth is the wife who is now divorcing him? Are there any early signs of fissures in their union?
11. Why are so few of the primary characters, including his mother and wife, referred to by name?
12. In the last sentence, Arvid is still despairing, waiting for his mother to come to him. Who do you think is in the wrong? What do you think must happen for a peaceful resolution between them?



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