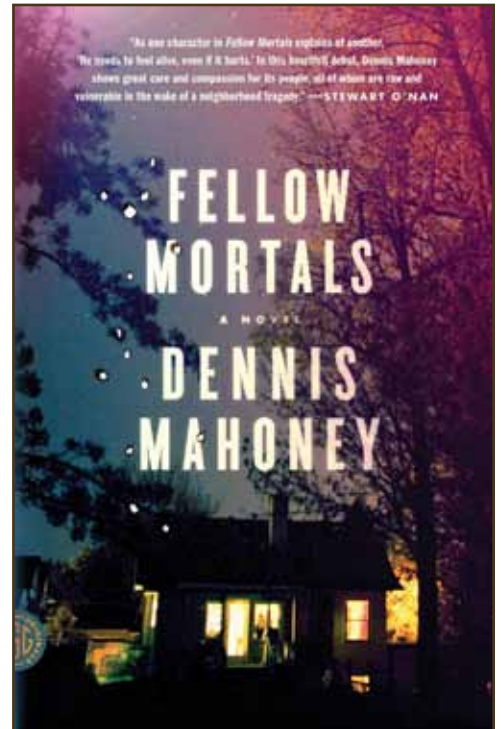


# Reading Group Gold

## *Fellow Mortals*

### *A Novel*

by Dennis Mahoney



ISBN: 978-0-374-15406-6 / 288 pages

In Dennis Mahoney's captivating debut novel, a community is torn apart by tragedy while one of its beloved citizens is forced to carry the crippling burden of blame. When Henry Cooper set out on his mail route one crisp spring morning, he unwittingly sparked a fire that destroyed a neighborhood and claimed the life of a local artist's young wife. In the aftermath, some point to Henry's carelessness, while others exalt his heroism. His wife is his ardent defender, but the judgment of others begins to take its toll. While the victims slowly rebuild their lives, the sculptor Sam Bailey finds it particularly difficult to see Henry as anything other than a menace who should pay for the death of Sam's wife. Exploring the complex terrain of loyalty and loss, *Fellow Mortals* charts the fall of a man who has dedicated his life to doing the right thing and then finds himself embroiled in a fierce struggle to understand what the right thing is.

We hope that the following discussion topics will enhance your reading group's experience of this deeply moving novel of redemption and its price.

#### QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the difference between a house and a home. What do our houses provide besides shelter? In the wake of the tragedy, how do the characters in *Fellow Mortals* find a sense of home, even in a tree house?

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2. What does the novel tell us about the many ways in which humanity responds to loss? How would you have felt about Henry if you had been a victim of the fire? What are the limits on your ability to forgive?
3. What accounts for Henry and Ava's strong marriage? How do they handle their disagreements? What is their trust built upon?
4. As Sam grieves for Laura, what image of their relationship emerges? How do his sculptures help him cope with regret and yearning?
5. How did your impressions of Billy change throughout the book? Is his anger a response to the many disappointments he experiences—including romantic and financial ones—or is his anger the cause of those disappointments?
6. Ethan and Danny provide us with a child's perspective on tragedy. How does their outlook compare to that of their parents? Is Peg overprotective or wise?
7. What is at the heart of Sheri and Billy's struggle in their relationship? What is the best solution for anyone who is in Sheri's situation?
8. In what way do Joan and Nan form a sort of "marriage"? How do they navigate uncertainty and change? What enabled them to make an unspoken commitment to sharing a household for the rest of their lives? Would you be content to set up housekeeping with one of your siblings in a later stage of life?
9. In chapter 20, Ava and Sam describe how they met their spouses. What makes it easy for them to bond? What do you think Henry's motivation was in sending Ava to be with Sam?
10. How would you characterize Henry's personality? Is he self-destructive, or is his sense of duty a good model for waging peace?
11. How does Sam's wooded landscape serve as a mirror of his mind, and of the minds of his former neighbors? What tone does it set for the novel's closing scenes?
12. Why is Ava determined to help Billy when he is injured? Why does she opt for rescue rather than revenge?
13. Were the novel's tragedies accidental? What does it take for healing to occur in their aftermath?
14. Ultimately, what does Henry teach us about the precarious nature of fate and atonement?

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## PRAISE FOR *FELLOW MORTALS*

“As one character in *Fellow Mortals* explains of another, ‘He needs to feel alive, even if it hurts.’ In this heartfelt debut, Dennis Mahoney shows great care and compassion for its people, all of whom are raw and vulnerable in the wake of a neighborhood tragedy.” —Stewart O’Nan, author of *The Odds*

“Dennis Mahoney mines the space between atonement and forgiveness in this unforgettable novel about a neighborhood cast adrift. Crisp and riveting, poignant and wise, *Fellow Mortals* crackles with humanity, with all its messy complexity. The characters of Arcadia Street will stay with me for a long time. Mahoney is an exciting new literary voice.” —Rae Meadows, author of *Mercy Train*

“Dennis Mahoney writes with equal wisdom about the human inclination toward kindness and about the harm we cannot help inflicting along the way. In this fine novel of fellowship, nothing comes easily and no one—no one—is without grace.” —Leah Hager Cohen, author of *The Grief of Others* and *House Lights*

“A cautionary tale about neighborhood life that’s candid, elegant, and very sympathetic. I don’t know if I should introduce myself to the family across the street or buy new locks and a gun.” —Rosecrans Baldwin, author of *Paris, I Love You but You’re Bringing Me Down* and *You Lost Me There*

“[A] subtle, populated narrative that cuts very close to the way we live now. By drawing us into his tale of loneliness, anger, and redemption, of a neighborhood torn apart and brought together by a terrifying event, Mahoney has written a story both cosmic and minute and, finally, one that is completely about ourselves.” —Tony Abbott, author of *Lunch-Box Dream*

“Mahoney’s characters, at once unique and utterly relatable, will stay with you forever. His is the kind of writing that makes me want to be a better writer.” —Zoe Fishman, author of *Saving Ruth* and *Balancing Acts*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dennis Mahoney** lives in upstate New York. *Fellow Mortals* is his first novel.

Reading group guide written by Amy Clements / The Wordshop, Inc.