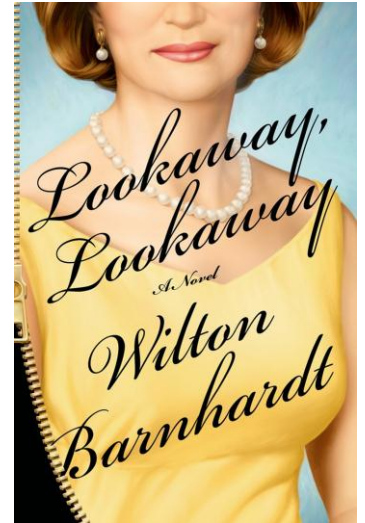


Reading Group Discussion Questions for *Lookaway, Lookaway* by Wilton Barnhardt



1. *Lookaway, Lookaway* is filled with memorable characters: indomitable Jerene, wounded but charismatic Duke, savagely funny Gaston, the adult Johnston children. Who is your favorite and why?
2. Though contemporary, this is definitely a “Southern” novel. Could this take place in another part of the country? What does it mean to be Southern anymore? Is it a nostalgia kept alive by a few old Civil War-enthusiasts and deluded High Society matrons, or is there really such a thing as “Southern”?
3. What is Jerene Johnston doing five years from the end of the novel? She’s a survivor, of course, but what will her life look like?
4. Self-destructive doesn’t even begin to describe the Johnstons. Who do you think is responsible for the family’s dysfunction? Is Duke’s failure to live up to his promise the start of it or does it go back even farther?
5. Bo and Kate once thought they would form a model Christian couple, with Bo emphasizing the institutional church life and Kate always hankering for the mission fields and the active, even radical faith. At the end of the book, have they gone their separate ways for good? How much did their differing views of religion contribute to their break-up?
6. What happens to Jerene’s family art collection? Who inherits it?
7. None of the Johnston children should write a romantic advice column. But who will end up the happiest? Is it improbably possible that Nonso and Joshua will have the best chance of living happily ever after? Despite Duke and Jerene’s solid union, none of the children seems to have figured out how to make a good match or marriage. Is there a reason for that?
8. Gaston adds himself to the pile of badly behaving, flagrantly drunken/unhappy Southern male writers (Faulkner, Wolfe, Dickey, Penn Warren, Capote, Tennessee Williams, et al). Is Norma correct—do these men just play at “Southern writer” or is there something especially destructive that lurks in the Southern literary profession?
9. What will Annie’s relationship with her mother be like after her father passes away? Will they be estranged or make some kind of détente? At the end of the book, Annie is free of the South and the pressures of the family? Will she be happier?
10. Race. Most chapters brush against (or take head-on) the inescapable topic of race in the South. The bad old days of Jim Crow may be gone, but how does the ever-changing mechanics of race-awareness and racism, overt as well as passive, limit and influence the white characters’ lives?

11. Class. Mrs. Johnston swears a couple can hail from different countries, different races or religions, but providing they share their class in common it might work out. Annie insists “class” is dead as a concept in America and that love will overcome all. Is Jerene right?
12. The Civil War—still alive, in some mutated fashion, in the South. (Maybe even still being fought.) Does anyone care about the war anywhere else in the country? Has a defeat for a lost and inglorious cause 150+ years ago truly cast that long and lasting a shadow over the American South?
13. *Lookaway, Lookaway* pokes a lot of fun at the Old Confederacy’s concepts of honor and the glorious gesture. Is Gaston and Duke’s final such gesture, their “honorable” solution to the inevitable decay and indignity that awaits them, merely ludicrous or is it actually chivalrous, a last romantic gesture and quest for a kind of nobility?
14. Humor is central to Barnhardt’s telling of the story. While the characters are strong and dominant, they are also really funny—intentionally or otherwise. Why is a sense of humor so important when reading this book? Which character do you think is the funniest and why?
15. Dorrie and Kate are the book’s outsiders, the eyes and thoughts of the reader. Are they changed for the better by entangling themselves with the Johnstons, or damaged? Does Kate depart the South for the mission fields mostly to escape the Johnstons and their values? Will Dorrie continue to be a faithful friend to Joshua and to Jerene?
16. Granted, Jerene is adept at fraud and petty criminality (particularly where shaking people down for money is concerned) and could probably kill detractors with her bare hands, but aren’t her sins in the service of her family? Or is she motivated by the false god of Society’s opinion and outward appearances? Is she admirable, or at least likable? Every family has a Jerene to some degree... in *your* family, is it *you*?

Wilton Barnhardt on writing *Lookaway, Lookaway*:

What was the inspiration for your book?

Half a century of a Southern upbringing. I did my best to decamp from North Carolina, from eighteen to forty, and it was not my intention to come back here to live, but I returned in order to teach at a new MFA in Creative Writing program at NC State University, a university in which three generations of Barnhardts had taught or studied. I suppose that got me to thinking about belonging to a place, which got me to thinking further that maybe I did belong to the South, after all, despite much earlier noise about being a Citizen of the World.

Who are your favorite authors?

Anyone 19th Century (Henry James, Tolstoy, Balzac, Flaubert, et al). John Dos Passos, William Faulkner, Willa Cather. Among current writers, Valerie Martin, Alice Munro, William Trevor, Allison Lurie, John LeCarre, William Boyd, the crime fiction of Ernest Gaines, the historical fiction of Hilary Mantel, and too many poets to list...

How and why did you start working on this book?

I declared I would write ONE and only one Southern novel, and always imagined I would write it near the end of my life (with all my accumulated wisdom about the South), but I was struggling to finish a Western book that was set in the Time of the Padres. I was teaching at Caltech and luxuriated in Huntington Library privileges... each afternoon, after class, I walked over to the great library and called up all sorts of arcane Spanish histories and prospector's journals—you name it. But when I moved back down South in 2002, I couldn't do that kind of homework and those materials aren't anywhere but out West, so I asked myself, "What can you write that you can research right here in North Carolina?" And so the Southern Novel moved to the front of the line.

What kind of experience has writing your book been for you?

A blast from start to finish. Once I got the plot in my head, it became fun like a parlor game: how to tell a story among the eleven characters from their eleven different points-of-view, moving forward, and never repeating a viewpoint. I was going to have a NASCAR chapter and a good deal about country music, but as the plot deepened around the money troubles of the Johnston clan, many other detours and digressions fell away.

Tell us anything about you as a working writer that you think might be interesting or unusual:

I procrastinate—hence the long delays between books—I am lazy, I have no work ethic, I have to “feel like” writing in order to do it, but when I feel like it I can produce ten-to-twenty pages at a sitting. I write best in motels/hotels. I have gone to hotels a mile from my house in order to write.

Did you have any interesting experiences where you were researching Lookaway, Lookaway?

I wandered around UNC-Chapel Hill during Rush weekend, even getting a beer from some nice guys at a frat that shall, for their own safety, remain nameless; I also went to the NC Debutante Ball. I hadn’t worn my dinner jacket in five years and someone had, um, broken into my closet and shrunk that thing way down. I went to a small Civil War re-enactment in central North Carolina. The people were totally nice to me, utterly devoted to period detail and the music and habits of the time, and so I’m going to be vague about when and where since my book will likely appall them—I have quite a lot of fun at re-enactors’ expense. Additionally, I let myself hear every bit of good gossip from Raleigh, Winston-Salem, and Charlotte concerning High Society. Well, I might have eagerly listened to all that, book or no book!

Who do you feel is the reader for your book?

Anyone who might like a page-turning family saga, from the literary readers who admire Tolstoy or Trollope to the readers of good commercial, domestic fiction; any Southerner (who will recognize a lot of the stranger episodes as true); lovers of a good twisted tale of family mischief, secrets, mysteries; people with a passing interest in the Civil War. People with a sense of humor.

How is Lookaway, Lookaway different from other “southern” fiction?

This is a New South book, without dreamy nostalgia or olden-times romance—no Mawmaw and her Mason jars, no front porches, no golden late light through the Spanish oaks. This is the South in the Age of Obama, as it is, with all the excitements of modern American life, plus the inescapable Southern legacies.

10 Books to Read About the South by Wilton Barnhardt

I'm going to assume Hurston, Welty, Penn Warren, Wright, and all the giants of the past are already known to y'all, so I have confined my subjective, totally personal list to living Southern authors, who, to my mind, are every bit as good as the O'Connors and McCullers that came before us. The Voigt and Emerson are books of poetry, but reading groups fear not! The poems are narrative, connected, full of character and insight like (and better than) a novel. Yes, I know I said "living" authors, but I included Faulkner's *The Hamlet* because Faulkner can never really be dead in South. And no one reads that one and it's great.

Ellen Gilchrist, *Victory Over Japan*

Ernest J. Gaines, *Of Love and Dust* or *A Lesson Before Dying*

Ron Rash, *Serena*

Valerie Martin, *Property*

Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*

Percival Everett, *Erasure*

Claudia Emerson, *Pinion* (poetry)

Ellen Bryant Voigt, *Kyrie* (poetry)

William Faulkner, *The Hamlet*