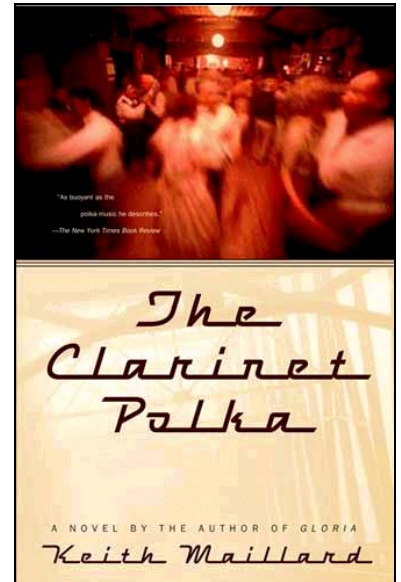


# READING GROUP GUIDE

## *The Clarinet Polka* by Keith Maillard



**St. Martin's Press**

ISBN: 0-312-30890-6 (paperback)

0-312-30889-2 (hardcover)

### Introduction to *The Clarinet Polka*

Author Keith Maillard received critical acclaim with his novel *Gloria*, which told the story of a young woman on the cusp of womanhood in a town called Raysburg, West Virginia. In *The Clarinet Polka*, Maillard turns that same eagle-eyed attention to the other side of the tracks of that very same town and creates a stunning portrait of Polish America and of one man's struggle to find meaning in his life and roots.

The year is 1969, and young Jimmy Koprowski returns from his stint in the airforce to Raysburg, his blue-collar Polish American hometown where nothing much happens beyond working at the steel mill, going to Mass, and getting drunk at the local PAC. Jimmy's efforts at rebuilding his life result in sleeping off hangovers in his parents' attic and drifting into a destructive affair with a married woman.

But things change when his younger sister Linda decides to start an all-girl polka band, and Jimmy falls for the band's star clarinetist, Janice, whose young life is haunted by tragic events that happened before she was born. The threads of Jimmy's family life, the legacy of WWII Poland, and the healing power of music, language, and tradition all begin to converge.

At once gritty and compassionate, moving and witty, *The Clarinet Polka* showcases the emotional and perfectly pitched voice of a lost soul finding his way.

### Praise for *The Clarinet Polka*

"Maillard succeeds in giving Jimmy a distinctive voice . . . he's an older but less cerebral version of J.D. Salinger's Holden Caulfield."

- *The Charleston Gazette*, 3/23/02

"Deeply and authentically rooted in Polish-American culture...This is a remarkable novel from an important writer."

- Robert Olen Butler, Pulitzer Prize winning author of *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

"Rings utterly true . . . with a wicked sense of humor that keeps a reader hanging on his every word..."

- *Detroit Free Press* 2/23/03

## Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Discuss Polish stereotypes and how they are dispelled, reinforced, or explained in *The Clarinet Polka*. How do characters like Jimmy, Patty, Linda, and Mary Joe acknowledge and deflect these attitudes?
2. Discuss the friction between first-, second-, and third- generation Poles in South Raysburg and how this friction ties into European ideas of class, and how it lessens during the process of "Americanization." What does it mean to "be an American" to each of these generations?
3. Describe the life/death cycle of an ethnic community as portrayed in *The Clarinet Polka*. Is there a fundamental contradiction between becoming an all-American boy or girl and preserving ethnic culture? Compare Raysburg's Polish community with other American ethnic communities with which you are personally familiar.
4. Discuss the effects of war on Czeslaw, Georgie, and Jimmy. Do you think that Jimmy suffers from a form of "survivor's guilt," having gone to Guam but not Vietnam? How do Georgie and Czeslaw come to terms with the horrors of war and their own survival?
5. *The Clarinet Polka* is a love story with a happy ending. Is this realistic? Discuss the love story's parallels with the folk-tradition polka lyrics that thread through the book. Discuss the archetypal pull on Jimmy, of the "bad" married woman and the "good" virginal girl.
6. What is the importance of Polish Catholicism, prayer, and specifically the role of Our Lady, in the Polish psyche? What are the similarities between Christian spirituality and the principles put forward by AA that enable Jimmy to come to terms with his alcoholism?
7. Some people feel that alcoholism is too boring or depressing a subject for a novel. Do you think alcoholism is realistically portrayed in *The Clarinet Polka*?
8. The author has used Raysburg as the setting for his previous books, including *Gloria*, which was set in the 1950's. Talk about the role of Raysburg in the book, and how the town is like a character in the story.

## About the Author

**Keith Maillard** was born and raised in Wheeling, West Virginia, the inspiration for the fictional town of Raysburg which serves as the setting for *The Clarinet Polka* and *Gloria* (shortlisted for Canada's Governor General's Award). His previous eight novels include *Two Strand River* and *Alex Driving South*. He now lives in Vancouver with his wife and two daughters and teaches creative writing at the University of British Columbia.