

READING GROUP GUIDE

Snow Angels

A Novel

by Stewart O’Nan

Movie Tie-In Edition

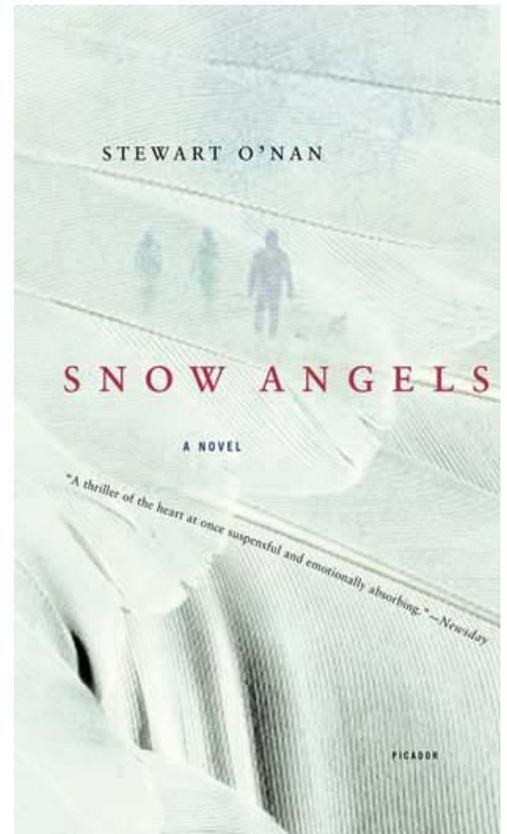
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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Snow Angels* 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 *Snow Angels*.

About the Book

Arthur Parkinson is fourteen during the dreary winter of 1974, experiencing the confusing pangs of adolescence and the pain of his parents' divorce. His world is shattered further by the sudden and violent death of Annie Marchand, his beloved former baby-sitter. Narrated by the adult Arthur, who continues to be haunted by memories, the story of a young man's unraveling family

and the circumstances leading up to Annie's death forms the backdrop for an intimate tale of the price of love and belonging, told in a spare, translucent, and unexpectedly tender voice.

Praise for *Snow Angels*:

"A thriller of the heart, at once suspenseful and emotionally absorbing." --*Newsday* (New York)

"Beautiful and harrowing...An exquisite double helix, each of its two strands the tale of an unraveling family, curving in tenuous but essential relation to the other." --*Elle*

"Stunning...A truthful and deeply sad picture of the American hinterland, which has lost religion and maybe also lost its capacity for sustained love....Wonderfully effective...O'Nan sees with a vengeance." --*The New York Times Book Review*

"Haunting...a whole that's much more than the sum of its parts...Moving, beautifully constructed, morally complex." --*The Washington Post Book World*

"Shines with a cold, stark light...Strangely beautiful." --*Los Angeles Times*

About the Author

Stewart O'Nan's critically acclaimed fiction includes *The Names of the Dead*, *A World Away*, and *A Prayer for the Dying*. With Stephen King, he is the author of the bestselling *Faithful*. *Granta* named him one of America's Best Young Novelists. He lives in Connecticut.

Discussion Questions

1. In *Snow Angels*, the characters pursue pleasures that they hope will lift them from despair – sometimes it is as simple as Annie's mother's desire for a Lorna Doone's cookie, sometimes it is an extra-marital affair – for Brock, it is perhaps Tricia. To what degree do you think the characters are entitled to these pleasures?
2. "She and Brock have been seeing each other for three weeks now but their affair has erased chunks of Annie's past." Discuss how, throughout the novel, the characters confront their former selves, and either become reacquainted with them or sever the connection.
3. Glenn is a Born Again Christian; Arthur and his mother move into an apartment complex that used to be dormitories for a failed seminary – a somewhat compromised desire for salvation seems to permeate the story. Discuss the ways in which the characters attempt to redeem themselves, and how the struggle to become something better affects the whole tone and environment of the book. Is it also significant that Glenn works in a junk yard, where the spare parts of burned out cars get a second chance?

4. From time to time the characters are preoccupied by the Pittsburgh Steelers, a team that seemed unstoppable in the mid-1970's. They also comment on the scores for the local football team. In a small town where the expectations are either modest or completely dashed, do you think it is common for people to pin their hopes, and perhaps even their pride, to a football team? Annie observes that the parking lot at the motel is full, and then imagines that they are the cars of "football widows" – is it only the men, then, who are so distracted?
5. Along those same lines, it is interesting to note that Arthur's mother loved a man who did not love her back, that she was "alone" in her dream of romance. Discuss the significance of this observation to all of the characters in *Snow Angels*.
6. Glenn is on anti-depressants; do you perceive depression as a disease that must be controlled by medication or as a condition that can only be overcome by will power? By religion? By love?
7. Discuss how Glenn and Annie manage the end of their relationship, with particular attention to their old attachments to one another. At first it seems that, for Annie, Glenn has not necessarily lost his charms, she even finds herself occasionally beguiled by him, but she knows that it will lead nowhere, that there is falseness behind it. Could the tragedy of Glenn and Annie have been caused by their inability to move on, to truly free themselves of old attachments?
8. Who do you think is more at fault for Tara's death, Annie or Glenn?
9. Annie says the reason their marriage ended was because Glenn did "nothing"; in your opinion, would we be happier if we accepted our partners as-is and love them for their particular character and disposition, without the expectation that the partner will transform, grow? Consider also the aspirations of the other people in town – out of them all, who at the end seems the most content? Arthur? Lila? Perhaps Mr. Chervenick?
10. Does *Snow Angels* have a religious point of view? Is this novel truly about a community that is spiritually famished? Or can we use the words religion, hope, and love interchangeably when discussing the themes of this book?
11. In this novel, we observe the deterioration of two relationships from two very different angles – in the case of Annie and Glenn, we experience it from within, and in the case of Arthur's parents, we watch from outside. What is the difference, and why do you think Stewart O'Nan tells the story this way? At one point, when Annie and her mother are talking about the Parkinson's divorce, she says they "always seemed happy to me."
12. It can be said that *Snow Angels* is a book with a soundtrack: Steely Dan, Cat Stevens, Aerosmith, Neil Young, and other 1970's rock 'n' roll is piped in on various car radios, or through Arthur's headphones. When Glenn is happy about his lunch date with Annie, he runs every detail of it through his head "until he knows it like a favorite song". Discuss the importance of music to the novel, how is the author carefully using it to help tell his story?

13. What does Arthur's mother mean when she says, on pg 67, "Don't ever become a woman"? Are the women in this story afflicted in a way that the men are not? It is interesting to note that all of the women here work, and that Glenn has difficulty holding down a job – is it part of his general failure that he is "not man enough"?
14. Discuss the blossoming affection between Lila Rayburn and Arthur, in what ways is it different or similar to the strained or failing relationships throughout the book? Is there a general conclusion that you can draw about the nature of love and companionship from this book?
15. Annie and Glenn are constantly negotiating and balancing – see, for example, how Glenn attempts to pay for things (the photographs, their lunch together), and Annie attempts to neutralize his "generosity". Discuss how Annie and Glenn leverage their relationship, and what are some other small details that the author observes about how people in a relationship sometimes unintentionally try to get the upper hand?
16. Annie thinks at one point that she "can't imagine being so in love that she'd be unable to say no to someone." Why do people believe in unconditional love, and are the expectations of such love fortifying or detrimental to one's emotional health?
17. Why is Annie annoyed with Glenn's habit of offering Tara choices, rather than simply telling her what to do? What does this say about Glenn, about Annie?
18. Interestingly, when Glenn visits his old school buddy Rafe to talk about his problems early in the novel, Rafe, who is sterile, simply tells him to be grateful for Tara. Is one source of conflict in the story the simple fact that the characters have trouble seeing far enough beyond their own wounds to offer comfort to one another? Is this a universal problem? Are there any characters who are an exception to this -- consider Arthur's relationship with his mother.
19. Glenn is adopted, and his personal folklore of faded memories is something he often meditates on (when he steals the frames from the department store, perhaps he is thinking it is his father's outlaw blood that made him do it). Do you think his life would have been different had he been born into a family that was stable? Would he still be depressed? Why do you think O'Nan includes these details of his past in the story?
20. A monumental event occurs at what is almost the precise halfway point in the book. Talk a little about how *Snow Angels* is structured, about where its large turning points fall, and their cumulative effect. In what ways is it similar or different from the five-act tragedies of Shakespeare, or Aristotle's model of a story with rising action, climax, and dénouement? Why do you think O'Nan chooses to begin the story with the gunshots, what is the dramatic effect?
21. What do you make of Brock's inability to cry after Tara's death? Although he assumes little responsibility, does he at times seem like the most well-adjusted character in the book? The most content? When Annie tells him he can leave, he thinks, "it's strange... how he's no longer afraid of falling through [the ice]."

22. At times Glenn is violent, other times fragile, and always, in his way, he is vulnerable. But would you have predicted that he was capable of what ultimately comes to pass in this novel?

Interview with the Author

- 1. Would you discuss how you began to write *Snow Angels*, how did the idea germinate?**

I was living in Ithaca, New York, when a little girl went missing in a snowstorm. Her mother found her mitten at the bottom of her driveway. Later someone mailed the other mitten to her, and the police investigated the disappearance as a kidnapping. In the end, the mother (divorced, with a new boyfriend who didn't want children) admitted killing the girl and burying her in the snowy fields behind their house. My children were little then, and the whole sequence of events overwhelmed me. I didn't understand how anyone could do that, and yet it seemed it was human behavior. Extreme, but human. So I tried to write a story getting to the heart of the mother. I couldn't. What I came up with was a short story about a girl who really does wander away in a snowstorm and the community that turns out to search for her. I told it in a distant third person to strip away any melodrama or sentimentality (heeding Chekhov's advice that "you must be colder" to let the reader really feel the emotion). It included many of the main and supporting characters of *Snow Angels*, meaning that, for a fifteen-page short story, it was way overpopulated. A few years later, when I was looking to start a novel, I returned to the story, which ends with the line about Arthur discovering the body of Tara. In the story he was a minor figure, mentioned only that once, but I realized that he would be the perfect first-person narrator, bring the reader closer and confessing how this one long-ago season changed his life forever. I had also become fascinated then with a number of murder-suicides on Long Island, where we lived, in which estranged husbands murdered the wives they proclaimed to love more than life. How do you come to kill the person you love most? Again, human behavior I just couldn't understand.

- 2. When you begin writing a book, how much of the story do you know, how much have you plotted ahead, and how much of it comes as a surprise to you?**

Sometimes I know the beginning (the mitten at the bottom of the driveway; Arthur's dad leaving) and sometimes I know the ending (the gunshots), but exactly how they fit together is a mystery. In this case, the mystery was compounded by there being two distinct story lines. How they twined and illuminated each other only became clear as I was writing. How Arthur would see his father in Glenn and his mother in Annie and himself in Tara were complete surprises, as well as those scenes where his world intersects with Annie and Glenn's (like at the Burger Hut).

- 3. Sometimes the meaning of a book title is obvious, and other times it is a mystery for the reader to figure out. Would you illuminate how you decided on the title of this book? How does any writer make that decision?**

My wife came up with the title *Snow Angels*. I'm terrible with titles. My original title for it was *Under the Water Tower*. Awful. I like the ephemeral nature of the snow angel and how that relates to Arthur's lost world, the impression of something childish and innocent now gone.

- 4. You have an acute understanding of the small torsions and counterbalances in marriages and romantic relationships, particularly those that are on the rocks. Would you talk a little about why you have written about relationships in this way?**

Early on, seeing the two storylines develop, I realized the book was about the obligations of love. The obligations of parents to children and vice-versa, as well as the obligations between husbands and wives. What happens when love goes wrong, or when love is difficult? Because it often does, and often is. So I was looking at the disappointments and frustrations we have with those closest to us, and the toll it takes on families.

- 5. What was it like to write the voice of Tara, how do you approach writing and developing the character of a small child? The scene of her death is incredibly affecting, would you talk also about how you were able to write such a disturbing scene?**

I guess I approach writing a small child the same way I approach writing any character. I was fortunate to have two small children then to observe closely, as well as their friends. I just kept my eye on what was important to them, what their daily worlds consisted of. Her death scene is really an Arthur-and-Warren stoned buddy scene, when they are searching along the snowy creek and culvert. It's kind of spacey but has a built-in suspense. Something bad is going to happen, and Arthur really doesn't want to be there. Once when I was working at a summer camp, we were woken up in the middle of the night to go search for someone who'd been in a car wreck and had wandered off bleeding into the dark woods. I used some of that feeling of guiding my flashlight through the bushes, hoping not to find anything.

- 6. There is so much fine detail and characterization in this book; even the descriptions of working in a restaurant are particularly well observed (the Maine Lobster special, the Insinkerator). Would you talk a little about how you imagine a character's life, and whether you do research before you render him or her?**

I do some research, but most of what I include is from memory – the odd little stuff that sticks out or makes an impression. Most of that is just scene-setting, concrete detail, but I try to see it through my characters' eyes. What would they naturally see versus what would they just take for granted? I keep notebooks with sections dedicated to each major character so I get to know them better without having to inflict all that detail or research on the reader. It's the old iceberg effect. I take a lot of notes and use very few.

7. Along those same lines, you go to a very dark place with your characterization of Glenn, particularly toward the end. How does a writer imagine such pain, and a character's resolve to do something so violent?

Glenn got to that place even though he didn't want to. He saw it was the only way, and still he had to convince himself to go through with it. Finally he viewed it as a crusade, something that would save or redeem him in a promised afterlife, if only he could endure it. He'd lost the only person he cared about in the world and didn't want to live anymore. Every day in the paper there are people who've been to that place, and we read accounts of their murders and suicides and murder-suicides. Few of us try to identify or empathize with them, and yet we know the passion and despair that's led them to do what they do. In most cases, they have the same hopes we have, or had them.

8. How much of a hand did you have in the film?

I read an early screenplay by David Gordon Green, but had no contact with him or anyone in the production thereafter. While it may share some dramatic elements, the movie has to stand on its own as a separate work of art, operating by its own internal logic. I'm grateful, though, that the film may win Arthur and Annie some new readers.

9. Astrid does not make it into the film. Any thoughts on why the character has a place in the book, but not in the movie, and about the other changes that occurred in the transition from novel to film?

Astrid is another missing part of Arthur's family and his childhood. She's a reminder that he's been left behind while she's escaped. He's already helpless, and here's a voice from thousands of miles away asking him to do something. The movie has to be more economical. It also does away with the retrospective frame (Arthur's lyrical introduction looking back over the decades), but again, the movie is its own thing. To include every element in the book would take an eight or nine hour film. Getting the mood is more important, and delivering the emotional world of Arthur and Annie and Glenn.

10. Who have been your literary influences?

In this book, by far the greatest influence is William Maxwell, his great *So Long, See You Tomorrow*. His narrator in that small but heavy novel takes responsibility for what he perceives as his past failings and tries to redeem himself and save that lost world by telling the story of a tragedy that stunned his small town long ago. Influences in later books include Virginia Woolf, Alice Munro, Robert O'Connor, James Salter, John Edgar Wideman, John Gardner, Joyce Carol Oates--the list goes on and on.

11. Would you talk a little about your writing habits: typewriter or word processor? The time of day you work? How long it takes you to finish a book?

I write on a laptop and try to put in an eight-hour day (nine-to-five) when I'm working on a draft. I'll revise in ink on the hardcopy at night, then start the day keying in those changes (and changing them) the next morning. The first draft of *Snow Angels* took ten weeks to write, but I'd already written the short story "Finding Amy" a year before that. After the manuscript won the Pirate's Alley Faulkner Prize--a year after I'd finished the fourth and fifth drafts--I entirely rewrote the last chapter. But it varies book to book. *A World Away* took seven years, while *The Speed Queen* took sixty-six days. And you can never tell. Some books look small when you start them but then grow and change and mutate. You never really know what you've got till you're well into the middle of it.

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