

READING GROUP GUIDE

Mr. White's Confession A Novel

by Robert Clark

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Mr. White's Confession* 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 *Mr. White's Confession*.

About the Book

St. Paul, Minnesota, 1939. A grisly discovery is made. On a hillside, the dead body of a beautiful dime-a-dance girl is found, and an investigation opens. Assigned to the case is Police Lieutenant Wesley Horner, a man troubled and alone after his wife's recent death, a man with his own demons. He soon narrows his sights on Herbert White, an eccentric recluse and hobby photographer with a fondness for snapping suggestive photographs of the dime-a-dance girls. As Horner discovers, White is also a man with no memory who must record his life in detailed journal entries and scrapbooks. For every interrogation Horner has, Herbert White has few answers, pushing the murder investigation into unknown territory, and illuminating the complex relationships between truth and fiction, past and present, faith and memory.

Praise for *Mr. White's Confession*

“As thrilling as it is unnerving...Could have been written by Dashiell Hammett or James Crumley—at their best.”—Greil Marcus, *Esquire*

“A pulsing tale of redemption and original goodness.”—Pico Iyer, *Time*

“Strong, brooding...Clark's most striking achievement is Herbert's ambiguity, making it appear at once vulnerable and threatening.”—Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

“Complex...intriguing...a fascinating and timely journey into the American psyche.”—Barbara Lloyd McMichael, *The Seattle Times*

“A novel of substance...reveals the subtlety of [Robert Clark's] artistry and the profundity of his vision.”—Merle Rubin, *The Wall Street Journal*

“The long ruminations of Mr. White...give the book its intensity and mystery.”—*The New Yorker*

“Robert Clark has written a book that is instantly familiar and continually surprising, a meditation on memory, love, and loss wrapped in the wrinkled suit of a classic American genre.”—James Lileks, *The Minneapolis Star-Tribune*

About the Author

Robert Clark is the author of the novel *In the Deep Midwinter* and *River of the West*, a cultural history of the Columbia River, and *The Solace of Food*, a biography of James Beard. A native of St. Paul, Minnesota, he lives in Seattle with his wife and two children.

Discussion Questions

1. Because of his faulty memory, Herbert White can only recollect the formative experiences of his distant past—his father leaving to serve in World War I and Nanna's death—and the events of the immediate past, incidents that happened a few hours ago or perhaps the day before. Can what Herbert remembers be trusted? Is your memory any more trustworthy than this?
2. *Mr. White's Confession* is in many respects an examination of good and evil. In Herbert's world, what form does evil take? How does his understanding of it differ from Wesley's? From Maggie's? On page 22, Farrell, the newspaper reporter, says to Wesley, “Like the book says, none of us is without stain.” Does that statement hold true even for Herbert, or is his character purely innocent?
3. Both Herbert and Wesley have unconventional relationships with women. What role does Maggie play in Wesley's life? How does Ruby affect Herbert? What is the importance of Herbert's “relationships” with film starlets like Veronica Galvin?
4. On page 122, Herbert says to Ruby, “I rather wish I remembered more, for your sake. So I could have more of a personality, more of a past.” In what ways has Herbert's

perception of his past formed him? How does Herbert's imperfect memory speak to the ways in which our own pasts, and our ability to remember them, shape who we are?

5. Most would agree that Herbert White's written confession to the murders of the two dancers was coerced and therefore not altogether true. Why do you think Herbert confessed?
6. On page 24, Herbert writes, "When I am making a print, when I am dodging or burning an exposure, I am gilding [places of beauty], illuminating them, or protecting the tenderest places from the scald of light, burnishing them with shadow. It is as close as I ever come to touching them, but I am helping them be—or rather become, for a photograph is only a moment of becoming." What do you make of Herbert White's hobby—what is the importance of his photography in relation to the novel as a whole? How does it relate to his problems with memory?
7. Robert Clark wrote Wesley Horner's sections of the novel using the conventions of hard-boiled, pulp fiction. How does this technique fit with Wesley's character? How does this kind of writing differ from the journal entries of Mr. White? What kind of effect does this contrast have?
8. As the novel progresses, Herbert White comes to think about God more and more as his own circumstances steadily deteriorate. What do we learn from Herbert about faith? How does he come to his understanding of God? How does his relationship with God change throughout the course of the novel/ What about Wesley? Although he doesn't think about God as intensely as Herbert does, he does experience a rebirth of faith? How does that come about?

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