

MARTIN MARTEN

BRIAN DOYLE

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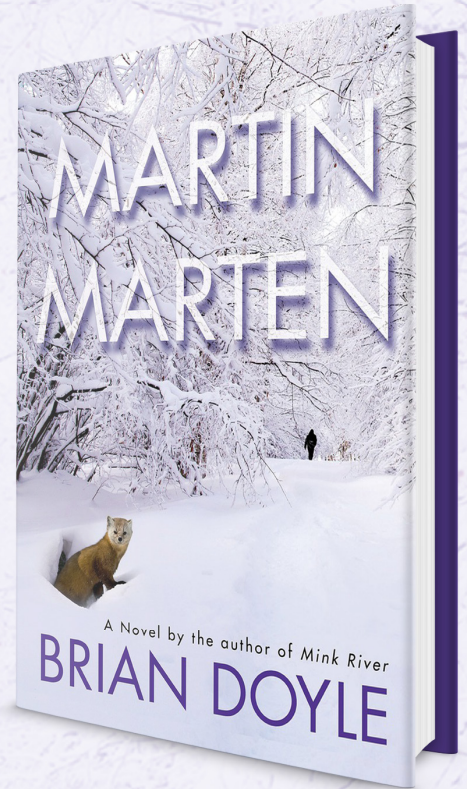
READING GROUP GUIDE

ABOUT THE BOOK

Dave is fourteen years old, living with his family in a cabin on Oregon's Mount Hood (or as Dave prefers to call it, like the Native Americans once did, Wy'east). He is entering high school, adulthood on the horizon not far off in distance, and contemplating a future away from his mother, father, and his precocious younger sister.

And Dave is not the only one approaching adulthood and its freedoms on Wy'east that summer. Martin, a pine marten (a small animal of the deep woods, of the otter/mink family), is leaving his own mother and siblings and setting off on his own as well. As Martin and Dave's paths cross on forest trails and rocky mountaintops, they—and we—witness the full, unknowable breadth and vast sweep of life, and the awe-inspiring interconnectedness of the world and its many inhabitants, human and otherwise.

Martin Marten is a coming-of-age tale like no other, told in Brian Doyle's joyous, rollicking style.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author has often said that his driving ambition with *Martin Marten* was to make readers care just as much about the pine marten and his family and adventures as we are predisposed to care about the boy and his family and adventures. Did you find this to be true? Are many books awfully human-centric, do you think?
2. Did you know what a pine marten was before you read this book? Are you more interested in woodland life and creatures than you were before?
3. Is it easier to absorb a vast amount of natural history and science if it is cast as story, and not as facts to be studied? Is literature, then, perhaps a wonderful way to teach and study all sorts of things that seem overwhelming when they lurk intimidatingly in textbooks instead of novels and films?
4. There are many fine books and films about subtle and complicated relationships between people and animals: *Big Red*, *Old Yeller*, *Rascal*, *Owls in the Family*, *Ring of Bright Water*, *Tarka*, *Red Fox*, *Black Beauty*, *My Friend Flicka*, *Gentle Ben*, many more. Have you read any of these, or other books that made you ponder the bruised and blessed world from points of view other than that of human beings? Did they, even gently, make you think that there are many more things to be known than ever we will know?

5. There are some passages in *Martin Marten* that might seem flights of fancy, or “magic realism” – Edwin’s interior monologues, Maria’s precocious intellectual gifts, Martin saving Maria from serious trouble in the blizzard. Did you find passages like that believable and possible and conceivable, or did you think that author was going a step too far from “reality”?
6. Who was your favorite character? Why was that? Is there one character you felt you understood the best, who perhaps thought and felt a lot like you do?
7. In Brian Doyle’s novels *Mink River* and *The Plover*, he uses various languages, and not just ‘American,’ the language he says he writes in – did you hope he would attempt to write in marten, in elk, in owl?
8. If you were going to commit a whopping novel starring an animal, what animal would it be?
9. The author has often said that he writes long discursive rollicking sentences because that is how people think and talk, and as long as he is clear, length ought not to matter overmuch. Do you agree? Or did you want to stop and take a breath sometimes? Or did you even get as far as shrieking lightly occasionally, and thinking, just for an instant, that you would love to tap the author on the shins with a stick and tell him to slow down and use a period here and there, on principle?
10. Are you more interested in mountains, after spending an entire novel on a mountain? Why do mountains draw our attention and awe so?
11. Is Miss Moss cool and independent-minded, in her insistence that she and Mr Douglas not be married formally and legally in the eyes of the state and of a religion, or is she self-absorbed and careless and reckless?
12. For all that Mr Douglas is eloquent and thoughtful about his profession as a trapper, were you convinced that his killing of beings who have done nothing to him is unobjectionable? Is it ever acceptable for one being to kill another? Should the general rules of killing that human beings try to apply to themselves apply to all sorts of beings? Are some beings subject to the wishes and decisions of others?
13. Is it reasonable for human beings to distinguish among species, and decide that some are easily killed and others killed only in certain circumstances, or is that specious nonsense, and the death of carrots and fish and cedar trees is the same as the death of cows and lambs and deer? Or put it another way: are vegetarians and vegans silly, when they say they will eat only certain living beings, and not others?
14. The author completely skips winter in *Martin Marten*, and instead gives us two springs, two summers, and two autumns. What in heaven’s name was he thinking? Were you discombobulated?
15. If you could email the author directly, knowing he would indeed read your note carefully, what would you say? Well, here’s your chance: bdoyle@up.edu. Be gentle.