

READING GROUP GUIDE

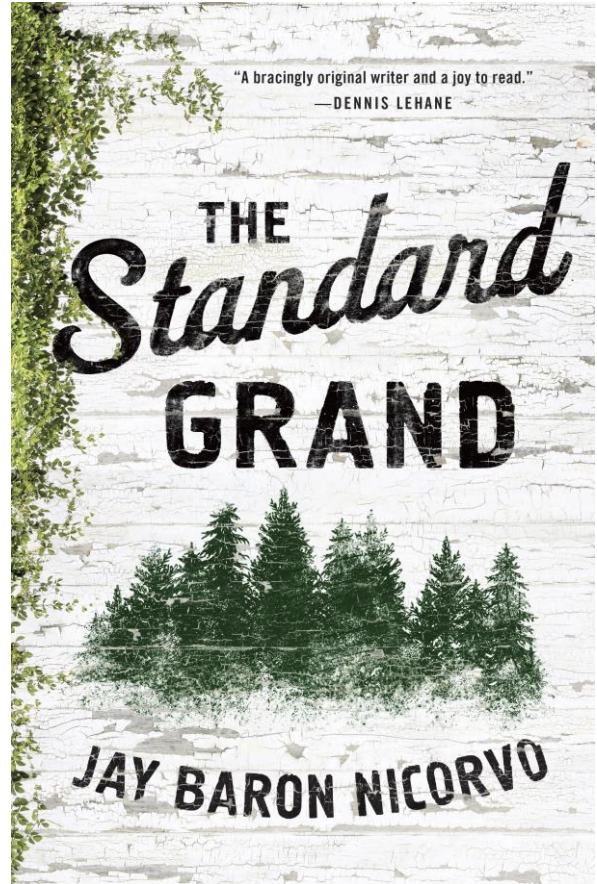
The Standard Grand Jay Baron Nicorvo

“A desperate masterpiece of a debut” that tells a huge-hearted American saga—of love, violence, war, conspiracy and the aftermath of them all. (Bonnie Jo Campbell)

When an Army trucker goes AWOL before her third deployment, she ends up sleeping in Central Park. There, she meets a Vietnam vet and widower who inherited a tumbledown Borscht Belt resort. Converted into a halfway house for homeless veterans, the Standard—and its two thousand acres over the Marcellus Shale Formation—is coveted by a Houston-based multinational company. Toward what end, only a corporate executive knows.

With three violent acts at its center—a mauling, a shooting, a mysterious death decades in the past—and set largely in the Catskills, *The Standard Grand* spans an epic year in the lives of its diverse cast. All of the characters—soldiers, civilians—struggle to discover that what matters most is not that they’ve caused no harm, but how they make amends for the harm they’ve caused.

Jay Baron Nicorvo's *The Standard Grand* confronts a glaring cultural omission: the absence of women in our war stories. Like the best of its characters—who aspire more to goodness than greatness—this American novel hopes to darn a hole or two in the frayed national fabric.



ISBN: 9781250108944

Discussion Questions

1. Few American war novels offer women protagonists. What’s taken so long? Can you think of Specialist Antebellum Smith’s predecessors, characters—either men or women, soldiers or civilians—who helped blaze the way for her?
2. Toward the end of the first section, “Summer 2012,” one character observes of another: he is “trying to turn loss into love” (p. 35). Are there other examples of characters trying, or failing, to do this very thing, turn loss into love?
3. A love story lies at the heart of *The Standard Grand*. What do you make of the relationship between Bellum and Ray? Is their love a result of desperation? Do you root for or against their union? Do you wish things turned out differently for them? Is their love story reminiscent of love stories in other novels or movies?



4. *The Standard Grand* is set largely in the Catskills. There, you get the mingling of two sorts of Americana: Borscht Belt meets Rust Belt. What do each of these settings in disrepair say about the novel, and, by extension, what do they say about America? How do these regions relate to the idea of desertion?
5. When Bellum eventually surrenders after deserting, the guard greeting her at Fort Knox says that our nation was “founded—hell, and filled—by folks running away. Deserting. Few things more American, you ask me” (p. 245). Desertion, one of the novel’s major themes, is expressed in numerous ways. Where else in the novel can you find notions of desertion?
6. Consider the title, *The Standard Grand*. What are some definitions of “standard” that seem particularly fitting. Why does the title differ from the name of the Borscht Belt resort, the Standard Grande. Why might the novel derive its name from the misspelled corporate report generated by IRJ, Inc.?
7. Can you tell from the novel alone whether or not the novelist is a military veteran? Are war novels written by veterans noticeably different from those written by civilians? How could an author’s status, as a military insider or outsider, determine the course of his or her war novel?
8. What is your reaction to the redactions? The redactions are a subtraction, but what might they add to the novel? Can you conclude what hides beneath the black redaction bars, that is, what IRJ has planned for the Standard?
9. The author assumes the voices and attitudes of numerous cultural, ethnic, and even zoological subgroups: military veterans, Florida crackers, a mountain lion, Yucatec Maya, executives of the petrochemical industry, Sammy Davis, Jr., etc. Are these portrayals convincing in every case? If so, how? If not, where and why?
10. In reviews, *The Standard Grand* has been likened to the work of Joseph Heller, Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Stone, J. M. Coetzee, Tim O’Brien, Ben Fountain, and Thomas McGuane. What do these writers have in common? What other writers might offer fair comparisons?
11. In a novel written by a man, the two main characters, Antebellum Smith and Evangelína Canek, are women. By the novel’s end, most of the men are dead or gone. What might this suggest about the current state of American masculinity? Could Bellum and Evangelína be seen as paragons of female empowerment? If so, how? Also, how might this very Western notion—female empowerment—offer contrasts to the social mores found in the Middle East and elsewhere?
12. In *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, Azar Nafisi writes that “most great works of the imagination were meant to make you feel like a stranger in your own home.” Did *The Standard Grand* inspire this sense of secure strangeness? If so, at what points in the novel was this sensation aroused?
13. Acclaimed novelist Scott Spencer has noted that *The Standard Grand* is “attuned to the violence that lies beneath that fiction we call Normal Life.” What might Spencer mean by this, and how might *The Standard Grand* contribute to, and comment on, such a fiction?

14. The veterans of the Standard Grande are rowdy bunch, and some of their meandering talk centers around conspiracy theories. What role do conspiracies play in the novel? What specific conspiracies are given voice? Are there any truths to be gleaned from them?
15. Late in the novel, Bellum tells Ray: “The Standard is not Iraq” (p. 245). Contrary to this, how might the Standard be understood as a stand-in for Iraq, the way the Salem Witch Trials in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* substitute for McCarthyism and the investigations of the House Un-American Activities Committee? Can *The Standard Grand* be read as an allegory for the US invasion of Iraq?
16. Ezra Pound observed: “Literature is news that STAYS news,” and one of his contemporaries, William Carlos Williams, wrote: “It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there.” The same could be said about great novels, especially those that serve some public good, like *The Grapes of Wrath*, which helped to publicize the plight of the poor during and after the Great Depression. Is there any news to be gleaned from *The Standard Grand*? If so, what?
17. Nearly all of the characters in the novel have done some wrong, and a few of them are trying to make amends for the wrongs they’ve done. Cite examples of these wrongs, and how the characters are working to right them.
18. One quirk of *The Standard Grand* is the author’s use of quotation marks in dialogue, sometimes using them traditionally, sometimes dropping them altogether (p. 53). Can you discern a rationale behind this deviation from Standard American English? Likewise, did you notice the author occasionally shifts verb tense? Toward what end or effect? What might present-tense narration say about a character like Ray Tyro, and when Ray’s point-of-view shifts to past tense (p. 222), what might this suggest about his state of being?
19. At the close of the novel’s forth section, “Spring 2013,” a pregnant Bellum walks over the Kingston-Rhinecliff Bridge, and it occurs to her that she can understand the other characters, “can know their minds, know their lusts and trials, can understand—vaguely, mysteriously—what Travis’s life was like over this last year, and Ray’s life, too, and Milt’s and Evangelina’s, the vets of the Standard—the cougar’s even—they’re all there for her to fathom—momentarily, mistakenly—they’re all a part of her being, imperfectly imagined and misunderstood, but it’s okay, it’s something, she’s trying to know them, and it’s the trying, not the knowing, that’s everything” (p. 319). Why might the trying, not the knowing, be everything? How has Bellum been changed by the world of the novel? How has she, in turn, changed that world?
20. What was your reaction to the novel’s end in the Mojave Desert? Were you disoriented at first, much like Bellum? And why is she being referred to as Ant? Is the return to the desert tragic, Bellum caught in a closed and vicious cycle? Or is her return more open-ended and life-affirming?

Want to learn more about Jay Baron Nicorvo?
Visit www.Nicorvo.net