



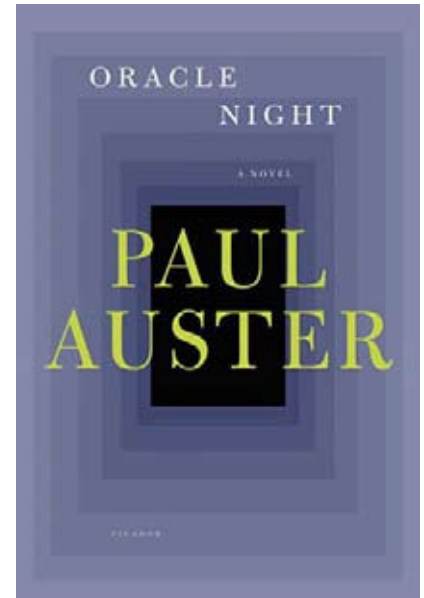
# Reading Group Gold

## Oracle Night

by Paul Auster

### About this Guide

Several months into his recovery from a near-fatal illness, thirty-four-year-old novelist Sidney Orr enters a stationery shop in the Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn and buys a blue notebook. It is September 18, 1982, and for the next nine days Orr will live under the spell of this blank book, trapped inside a world of eerie premonitions and puzzling events that threaten to destroy his marriage and undermine his faith in reality.



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Why does his wife suddenly break down in tears in the backseat of a taxi just hours after Sidney begins writing in the notebook? Why does M. R. Chang, the owner of the stationery shop, precipitously close his business the next day? What are the connections between a 1938 Warsaw telephone directory and a lost novel in which the hero can predict the future? At what point does animosity explode into violence? To what degree is forgiveness the ultimate expression of love?

Paul Auster's mesmerizing eleventh novel reads like an old-fashioned ghost story. But there are no ghosts in this book—only flesh-and-blood human beings, wandering through the haunted realms of everyday life. At once a meditation on the nature of time and a journey through the labyrinth of one man's imagination, *Oracle Night* is a narrative tour de force that confirms Auster's reputation as one of the boldest, most original writers at work in America today.

### Discussion Questions

1. How does the three-dimensional viewfinder that John Trause speaks of serve as a symbol for the novel? Think of it's evocation as a "magic lantern."
2. Discuss the use of color in *Oracle Night*, not simply the blue notebook, but his "tinted" descriptions of the city and his extended discussions of bodily fluids on page 42.
3. Sidney describes his discovery of (and subsequent productivity in) the blue notebook as "a little piece of black magic." How is coincidence a force in the novel? How does Sidney, and his creations, react to these mysterious encounters and occurrences? Does he – or they – believe in fate?
4. Why do you think the doors to Ed Victory's Bureau of Historical Preservation have no doorknobs? Is



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this an idea from another part of the novel made physical in Nick's story? Furthermore, what other sorts of ephemera from Sidney's life manifest themselves in Nick's world?

5. What of Sidney's feelings for Grace are projections of his feelings about himself? Think in particular about Sid's fraught reaction at Grace's disappearance directly after feeling guilty for attending Chang's strip club?

6. Return to page 210 of the novel. As Sidney re-evaluates the notebook and its influence on his life, he in some way announces that his story ends here? Is he trapped, like his protagonist? Why do you think he decides that the notebook is trouble?

7. Sidney is overcoming an illness; John Trause is ill; Ed Victory is ill; by the end of the novel, Grace endures serious ailments – where does physical suffering lead these characters? Are they changed by pain? Are they made better by it?

8. *Oracle Night* doesn't just play with notions of Time; it reinvents characters by way of the place within time, some even seem to be mis-placed (someone from the past who shouldn't be in the future; someone else who's tempered fate and suffered by being refused entrance into the future). Are there characters in the book that representatives of the past, or the future? Think of each and every character in the book? Do you think Trause's son's appearance at the book's close is a function of such philosophical play?

9. Does Sidney's destruction of the notebook cause Trause's death?

## About the Author

Paul Auster's most recent novel, *The Book of Illusions*, was a national bestseller, as was *I Thought My Father Was God*, the NPR National Story Project anthology, which he edited. He lives in Brooklyn, New York.

## An International Bestseller

"*Oracle Night* is a triumph...It cements [Auster's] growing reputation as one of America's most inventive and original writers." —*The Seattle Times*

"Compulsively readable yet wonderfully complex and unsettling. The book is both a babushka doll of stories within stories and literary Rubik's Cube, the solution of which, if there is one, is the very nature of reality." —*Boston Globe*

"[Auster] shines as a fabulist and tale-teller, putting a high-modernist gloss on noir." —*The New Yorker*

"A joy to read." —*The Economist*



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“It’s urban mysticism, a poetry of the hidden and the almost forgotten, with the supernatural power deriving equally from the city and the novelist’s imagination...a snow globe of a novel.” —*New York Magazine*

“A novel in which each narrative strand reflects elements of every other narrative strand, but in the spooky, distorted fashion of a fun-house mirror. As in New York Trilogy, he subverts our expectations of what a mystery story should be, and the reading experience is far richer for it.” --*Newsday*

“Auster’s approach to storytelling becomes more mystical, more intense, more labyrinthine, and more noir with each novel.... As one spellbinding and provocative storyline leads breathlessly to another, characters and readers alike are lured deep into the maze of the psyche until Auster orchestrates a terrifying denouement that burns away all ambiguity, leaving his hero enraptured by the radiance of what matters most: love.” --*Booklist*

“Compelling...Auster has outdone even Marcel Proust in demonstrating how much of a person’s life must go into the retelling of even a single moment of it.” --*Bookpage*

“A taut, impressive novel, with menace humming right from its outset.” --*The Times* (London)

“There is an uncanniness to everything Auster writes. Reading one of his novels feels like holding a spirit level up to the world, and finding that the bubble won’t settle where it should.” --*Evening Standard* (London)

“Beguiling...Auster walks a delicious line between the realistic and supernatural.... This neat, sweet volume is a joy to read. The prose is clean and translucent.” --*The Economist*

“Brilliant and harrowing...a great novel, as fine as anything this genius of a writer has ever imagined, and then some.” --*The Scotsman*