



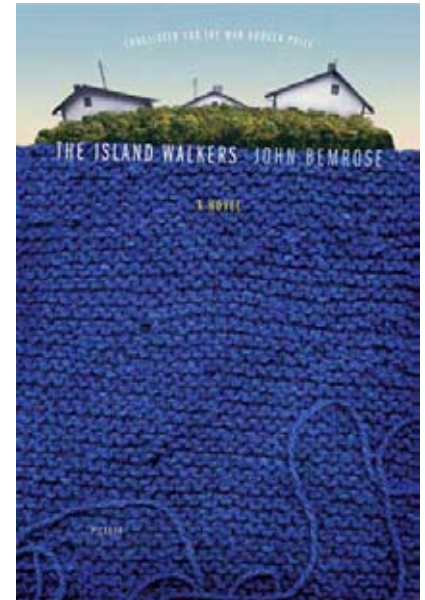
Reading Group Gold

The Island Walkers

by John Bemrose

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The Island Walkers*, are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this novel. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The Island Walkers*.



ISBN: 978-0-312-42369-8 | 2005

About the Book

Longlisted for the Man Booker Prize

A Finalist for the 2003 Giller Prize

Across a bend of Ontario's Attawan River lies the Island, where, for generations, the Walkers have lived among other mill workers. But in the summer of 1965, with the threat of mill closures looming, the Walkers grapple with their personal crises, just as the rest of the town fights to protect its way of life.

Superbly crafted and deeply moving, this book is at once a love letter to a place, a gripping family saga, and testimony to the emergence of an important new novelist.

"Clear-eyed narration and gorgeous description...a profoundly sensitive portrayal of a family's efforts to find its way through the tangled threads of desire and nobility, guilt, and love." —Ron Charles, *The Christian Science Monitor*

"Bemrose's poetic touch...finds beauty in obscure corners and grandeur in small victories." —*The Baltimore Sun*

"As fine as any [novel] you will read this year...Among its pleasures is that which comes from reading a writer with a genuine sense of place." —*New York Sun*

About the Author

A native of Paris, Ontario, John Bemrose lives in Toronto and writes for Maclean's magazine.



Reading Group Gold

Discussion Questions

“A town of two rivers, its plunging valley an anomaly in the tedious southwestern Ontario plain...The traveler, coming across this place, might be forgiven for imagining that life is better here.” During the mid-1960s, Attawan braces itself for changes that will destroy the life of this small textile mill town. Longlisted for the Man Booker Prize and a finalist for the 2003 Giller Prize, *The Island Walkers* is the poetically crafted story about a time of crisis that befalls the Walker Family. The tragic hero, Alf, must make a decision to either spy on his co-workers for his own advancement or be loyal to the people to whom he has generational ties. Meanwhile his son, Joe, slowly discovers himself after falling in love with the worldly Anna Macrimmon. *The Island Walkers* chronicles a family who is faced with decisions that will ultimately define who they are.

1. “For several generations, the people of the island- mostly mill workers and their families- had considered themselves quite separate from the town’s other residents.” How does the symbolic meaning of an island pertain to the Island residents? How do the residents of the Island compare to the residents of the Flats or the North End?
2. How do you view the Walkers? Are they a hard working family trying to make a better life for themselves or have their lives “gone up in war, in anger, in hope, in the churn of the knitting machines?” How is every member of the family faced with difficult decisions? Are they better people as a result of the decisions they have made?
3. At the start of the novel, Alf is anti-union despite the argument from Pete that “a union can do things... they wouldn’t be able to treat people like they do.” Discuss why the workers at Bannerman’s are anti-union. What would the merits of a union bring to the workers of Bannerman’s? Is Alf disingenuous to change his position about unions after he is fired?
4. When the McVey sisters and Anna go to Turtle Rock for a swim they are jeered because of their wealth and promptly leave. What is the significance of status in the novel? Is Anna’s mother correct when she said the people of Attawan are “crude...It’s all about hurry and money and a lack of pleasure in things”? Discuss the status of the Walker family. How does Margaret feel about her family’s lot in life?
5. Margaret tells Joe that “before he’d gone off to France his father had been a different man- a cheerful, outgoing person.” How has the war affected Alf? What parts of his past influence the decisions he makes for the future? (i.e. the war, the strike of ’49, the death of his brother, and his failed business.)
6. In negotiations for the foreman’s job, Bob Prince tells Alf, “Business is war...it takes a certain bloody-mindedness. You can’t worry about people too much.” Does Alf have the constitution for the business world? Discuss the choice he was given by Prince in order to advance in the company. Was he given a fair chance at the job? Is he destined to fail?
7. Although Alf is “resentful that he had to do anything, let alone distasteful, for the foreman’s job” he gives



Reading Group Gold

up the name of one worker. Why does Alf give up only one name? Is he a “stooge” for giving up Woody Marr? Since the layoff was one cause of Pete’s suicide, should Alf feel the guilt he does for his death?

8. Why does Alf carry on an affair with Lucille Boileau? What does the affair say about his character? How is Alf’s relationship with Lucille similar to the one Joe has with Liz McVey? What is the attraction between the two couples? What do they all learn from each other?

9. While bartending at the McVey’s New Year’s Eve party, Joe argues with Bob Prince over the virtues of socialism. Why does Joe engage this argument? Who do you consider wins the argument? How does the debate characterize Joe and his upbringing?

10. During a debate over poetry, Professor Mann tells Anna that poetry is “the beauty of life that passes us by with hardly a glance.” What does he mean by this statement? Discuss the influence of poetry in the novel. How does Anna express herself through poetry? What have poetry and Anna taught Joe?

11. At a meeting about the close of the factory, Alf states, “A lot of our grandmothers and grandfathers worked for Bannerman’s, we feel like it’s ours- hell, I think it is ours. Why didn’t you even ask us what we think should be done here?” Discuss whether you agree with Alf. Does Bannerman’s have an obligation to its workers if the factory becomes obsolete? Should the workers feel as if they have been left in the “lurch”? Does this justify the burning down of the mill?

12. After the mill burns down, police “were trying to piece together Alf’s whereabouts on the night of the fire. Apparently someone claimed to have sighted the Biscayne near the mills an hour or so before the alarm had been turned in.” Discuss whether or not Alf had a role in the burning down of the mill. Is Joe correct to think, “he was trying to help someone?” What should be Alf’s legacy?

13. At the conclusion of the novel, “a weakness infected” Joe’s body and his remedy is “the desire to go on, however weak or unhappy or afraid he still was.” How will the town of Attawan and the Walker family go on? How did it become a town where “the traveler, coming across this place, might be forgiven for imagining that life is better here?”