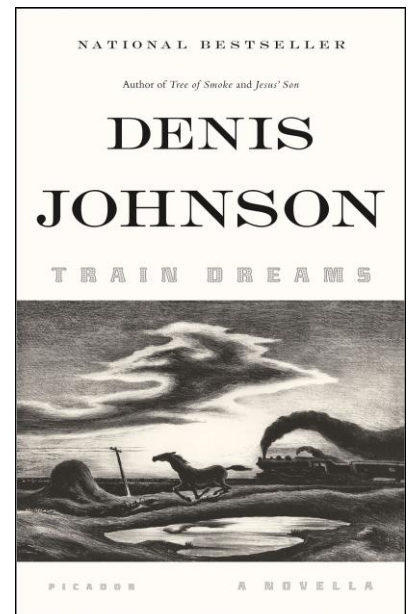


# Reading Group Gold

## Train Dreams

by Denis Johnson

Denis Johnson's *Train Dreams* is an epic in miniature, one of his most evocative and poignant fictions. It is the story of Robert Grainier, a day laborer in the American West at the start of the twentieth century---an ordinary man in extraordinary times. Buffeted by the loss of his family, Grainier struggles to make sense of this strange new world. As his story unfolds, we witness both his shocking personal defeats and the radical changes that transform America in his lifetime. Suffused with the history and landscapes of the American West, this novella by the National Book Award--winning author of *Tree of Smoke* captures the disappearance of a distinctly American way of life.



978-1-250-00765-0 | 128 pages

### Questions

\*Discussion questions courtesy of Farrar, Straus & Giroux

1. What did the incident with the Chinese laborer show us about Robert Grainier and his beliefs regarding human suffering?
2. What made Grainier and Gladys's marriage special? How was he transformed by his role as a husband and father?
3. What does the novella tell us about the nature of survivors such as Arn Peebles (chapter two) versus those who perish? How do the characters understand death?
4. In chapter three, how was the young Grainier affected by his encounter with half-dead William Haley and the tragic tale of Haley's niece?
5. What aspects of life in the West stayed the same as Grainier matured and grew old? What aspects of his life were lost to modernization?
6. For Grainier, is solitude a form of solace and peace, or is loneliness painful for him? Is his solitary life appealing to you?
7. What does Kate's story tell us about Grainier's capacity for love? Is his community cruel or just naïve?

8. In the third chapter, we're told that Grainier never knew his parents and wasn't even sure if he had been born in the United States or in Canada. In the absence of a mother and a father, who and what shaped his identity?
9. How does the novella's spectacular scenery become a character itself? How do the settlers balance the brutality of nature, captured in the horrific wildfire, with their desire to live on a frontier?
10. What does the demise of Kootenai Bob in chapter four say about the relationship between his people and the settlers? What determines who the outsiders are in Grainier's world?
11. Revisit the story of Peterson, who was shot by his own dog (chapter five). How do humans and animals get along in *Train Dreams*? What aspects of the animal world, and the spirit world, terrify the settlers the most?
12. Discuss the title. What are the dreamlike qualities of this novella? As Grainier expands the nation's rail system through his death-defying work, is he transported or trapped?
13. The novella contains many powerful scenes of backbreaking manual labor through which human beings "triumph" over nature. What circumstances drew them to this life? Under what circumstances would you be satisfied with so few creature comforts?
14. Discuss the novella's closing image. What did the wolf-boy reveal to a crowd of townspeople (including Grainier) who thought they had seen it all?



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