



Beneath the Bonfire

Nickolas Butler

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READING GROUP GUIDE

About the book:

Nickolas Butler's debut novel, *Shotgun Lovesongs*, has become an international bestseller and won numerous accolades, including France's Prix PAGE/America, previously won by Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding*. Now, in *Beneath the Bonfire*, he demonstrates his talent for portraying "a place and its people with such love that you'll find yourself falling for them, too" (Josh Weil, author of *The Great Glass Sea*).

Young couples gather to participate in an annual "chainsaw party," cutting down trees for firewood in anticipation of the winter. A group of men spend a weekend hunting for mushrooms in the wilderness where they grew up and where some still find themselves trapped. An aging environmentalist takes out his frustration and anger on a singular, unsuspecting target. One woman helps another get revenge against a man whose crime extends far beyond him to an entire community. Together, the ten stories in this dazzling, surprising collection evoke a landscape that will be instantly recognizable to anyone who has traveled the back roads and blue highways of America, and they completely capture the memorable characters who call it home.

Discussion Questions

- 1.) Are you more likely to read a novel or a collection of short stories? Why do you gravitate towards one or the other? What are your favorite short story collections, and why do you consider them successful?
- 2.) What similarities exist between Nickolas Butler's *Shotgun Lovesongs* and this collection, *Beneath the Bonfire*? What differences? Do you like to read the same kind of story or stories from the same author? Or are interested in an author choosing new paths?
- 3.) Some of the characters in *Beneath the Bonfire* are acting out in almost righteous ways against individuals they deem as clearly guilty, evil, or responsible (think: "Sweet Light Crude" or "In Western Counties"). Do you agree with their sense of right and wrong? Their brand of righteousness? Do they end up bringing about more good, or evil?
- 4.) Male friendship is a central theme in some of these stories (as it was in *Shotgun Lovesongs*). What is



your sense of how male friendship is depicted in popular American culture? Do you think Butler's representation of adult friendship (male or otherwise) is accurate or idealized? How have your own friendships changed and/or evolved through the years? How is adult friendship different than the friendships of our youth?

5.) Many of these stories seem to glow with a kind of moral indignation, perhaps in regards to environmental degradation, the shifting realities of family and marriage, or America's love affair with violence. What is the role of literature, of art, in terms of commenting on larger societal issues? Or should literature not attempt to comment on politics and socio-economic issues?

6.) This is a collection brimming with interesting original characters. Which character would you most like to meet, have a drink with? Which character would you most like to avoid? What questions would you ask these characters, the writer?

7.) In the early stages of drafting this collection, the author seriously considered leaving out the story "Apples," to create a more singularly dark tone throughout the collection. What do you think about the decision to keep "Apples" as part of the collection? Is there a significance in making "Apples" the final story of the collection?

Want to learn more about Nickolas Butler?

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