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Reading Group Gold

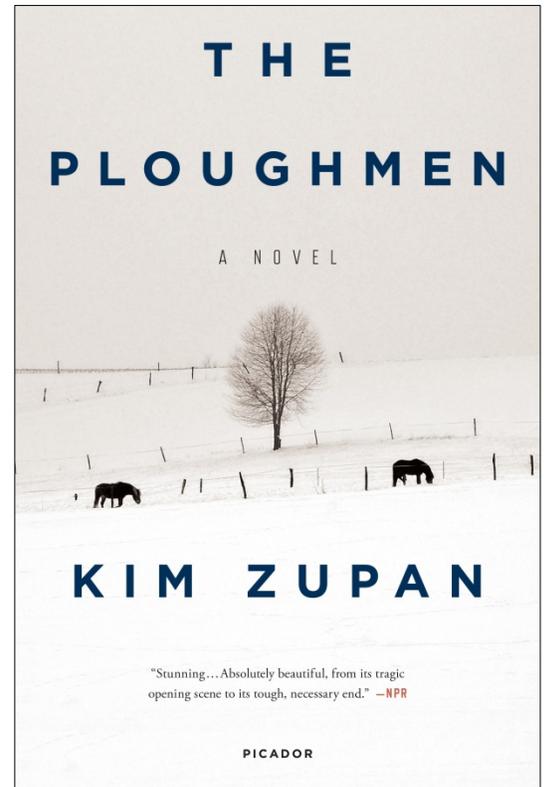
The Ploughmen

A Novel

by Kim Zupan

ABOUT THE BOOK

Steeped in the lonesome Montana country, unyielding as it is beautiful, *The Ploughmen* is the story of two men—an aging killer awaiting trial, and a troubled young deputy—who sit across from each other in the dark, talking through the bars of a county jail cell. John Gload is a killer so brutally adept at his craft that only now, at the age of 77, has he faced a long-term jail sentence. Valentine Millimaki, the low man in the Copper County sheriff's department, is the unfortunate soul who draws the overnight shift after Gload's arrest. Soon, though, the conversations between Gload and Millimaki grow familiar, and the troubled young sheriff finds himself seeking counsel from a man he's sworn to keep behind bars, a man whose dark past shares something essential with his own. Zupan, also a carpenter, "writes with the precision of his trade" (*The New York Times Book Review*) and delivers a new classic of the American west.



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QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. The lonely, expansive Montanan countryside looms large in *The Ploughmen*. What does North American rural life represent to John and Valentine? How does it affect their relationship?
2. Deputy Valentine's guilty conscience over the victims he has not been able to save weighs heavily on him. How is this related to Valentine finding his mother's body after her suicide? What do you think he's really looking for as he searches for the victims?
3. When talking to Valentine, the sheriff wonders aloud why John opens up to him: "Just hates cops like all get-out. But he talks to you." Valentine answers, "We talk about farming." What other reasons do you think John opened up to Valentine and not to any other officers who were on duty?
4. What is the significance of the book's title?
5. To combat insomnia, John would revisit his past, thinking of his favorite plowing field and his fond, monotonous memories from the tractor seat. Sometimes in this dream he would envision gulls coming to feast on infant mice. He could not parse them out, try as he might, and their screaming would keep him from sleep. What might the seagulls symbolize?

6. In chapter four John told Valentine that there are not many things he regrets. And he's not exactly eaten up by the few things he does regret. Do you find this to be true? Why or why not?
7. John admitted to Valentine that though he had many opportunities to kill him, he spared him for the sake of their friendship. Why do you think John spared Valentine's life?
8. Near the novel's end, John is languishing in prison. How do you think he perceives death at this point in his life?
9. Valentine and John both have troubled relationships with women. Valentine's marriage to Glenda is on the rocks, he's distant from his sister, and he is still haunted by his mother's suicide. John, as well, has complicated feelings about Francie. Discuss the roles of female characters in the book and how they've affected these men.
10. In her letters to Val, his sister saves questions about their mother for the post script. Each question hits Val like a gut punch. Why do you think it's so hard for him to connect with his sister?
11. The female characters in the novel constantly search for something more or feel their current world is not enough—whether it was Valentine's mother looking for a way out, or Glenda's yearning for something outside her marriage and the house she and Valentine shared, to Francie seeking companionship that John couldn't provide. What are your thoughts about the isolation these women felt in a predominantly male, rural environment? What do you think the author is trying to say about gender roles in this particular world?
12. In chapter one when Francie is introduced, John imagined Francie's spirit fluttering among moths as they battered themselves against the window screen, which he identified as small souls seeking the freedom of the greater world. Do you think he envisioned a normal life with her? Do you think John always knew Francie's fate, or was this something he had recently decided?
13. Discuss the end of *The Ploughmen*. Do you feel more or less empathetic towards John now that you know his story? Why or why not?

About the Author

Kim Zupan, a native Montanan, lives in Missoula and grew up in and around Great Falls, where much of the novel is set. For twenty-five years Zupan made a living as a carpenter while pursuing his writing. He has also worked as a smeltermen, pro rodeo bareback rider, ranch hand, Alaska salmon fisherman and presently teaches carpentry at Missoula College. He holds an MFA from the University of Montana.

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