

READING GUIDE FOR THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

by Samuel Shem. 4/19/08

How would you describe the relationship between Selma and her son Orville? How would you describe the relationship between Miranda and her son Cray? Compare these two mother/son relationships.

Orville falls in love with two different women—Celestina and Miranda—each of whom he feels is “the real thing.” How would you talk about the similarities and differences between these two relationships. What does each tell you about Orville? When he chooses between the two of them, does it make sense?

Bill Starbuck and Orville are doctors from two different eras. What does it tell you about medicine then and now? The novel is set in 1983-4. How has doctoring—and medicine—changed from that time until now.

There is a great deal in the novel about secrets, and public presentation of self. Selma, Celestina, Miranda, Schooner—even Cray and Amy—deal with the issue of how you “are” in private and in public. Is this familiar?

As a novelist and doctor and person, my life makes me believe in the possibility of redemption. Peoples’ lives don’t just stay the same or go straight to hell. Thinking about the characters—not only Orville and Miranda and Celestina and Selma, but Henry Schooner (from boyhood to manhood, and in re-meeting Orville) and Amy and Cray and Milt and Penny—does this make sense? Who is redeemed, who is not? Have you known redemption in your lives?

Suffering plays a central role in the novel, not just in the medical elements but also in each of the movements of the characters. Can you look at this prevalence of suffering, and try to see if it leads to more suffering, or to understanding and action for the good? What does Orville’s hearing the words “Don’t spread more suffering around” (when he is on the train) mean, and where does it come from?

My novels “ride” on humor. How is this true of THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE?

Politics—the year 1983-4—one of the years of the Reagan Revolution, is a strong undercurrent in the book. How is it affecting not only America and Columbia, but the practice of medicine? What part does it play in the relationship between Orville and Miranda?

History, in all its forms, is central here. Talk about this history in THE SPIRIT—personal, political, Columbian, economic, and world.

Where do you think each of these characters will be in 20 years? (I'm thinking of writing a sequel, set in 2003-4).

Over my desk I have two quotes. One, from Anton Chekhov: “The best of writers are realistic and describe life as it is, but because each line is saturated with the consciousness of its goal, you feel life as it should be in addition to life as it is, and you are captivated by it.” The second, from a Vietnamese Buddhist teacher named Thich Nhat Hahn: “Arts and letters must both reveal and heal. To reveal means to show the true situation of people and society. To heal means to show ways to cure them.” How are these true of this novel?

The great themes in fiction are love and death. How is this true of THE SPIRIT?

Why is this book called THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE?