

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

The Cradle

A Novel

by

PATRICK SOMERVILLE

Patrick Somerville on the origins of *The Cradle*

In the summer of 2007, I drove east from Chicago to Virginia on my way to a monthlong residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, where I planned to work on . . . something.

I'd made a few false starts with novels in the preceding years, and I'd yet to really hit upon a kind of story, or way of storytelling, that felt right. I had some stored-up ideas with some promise, but no real plan about which one I'd work on. My simple hope was that I'd figure out something and leave Virginia with chapters I could work with through the fall. The only question was whether I could deal with the looming, perhaps impossible, question of plot.

One hazy idea was simple, linear, and to be set in the contemporary Midwest. Months before, I had written "person looking for something" on a piece of paper, folded it, and put it in my pocket. The paper was now gone, but it wasn't forgotten. At the very least, writing about this "person looking for something" seemed like it could train me out of a bad tendency I could no longer deny was a part of my fledgling novel-writing skill set: I seemed to believe "plot," in terms of our contemporary literary novel, referred to a labyrinthine sequence of events with little or no connection to the shared reality of human beings. This was my own fault, really, born more of my own anxiety than any opinions I had about other writers or other books. So far, arbitrary craziness was my answer

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to dealing with several hundred pages of text I simply didn't know how to write. Unfortunately, the problem with arbitrary craziness — sorry, one of many problems — is that it guarantees no reader will care about what comes next.

Looking back at the few scribbled outlines I made of novel ideas from that time and earlier is like looking at outlines of the small, detailed, and (sadly) postmodern mental breakdowns of a frustrated apprentice. However, for whatever reason, going to Virginia knocked some sense into me. “Person looking for something,” it turns out, is more than enough for a whole novel's plot, even in our fractured 2009, and that's basically the backbone of *The Cradle*. The simple premise wasn't an experiment in scaling back at all, nor an exercise, but instead the heart of a straightforward story, stripped down to make room for the characters to roam with a bit more freedom, motivated by reasons that were relatable, and important, not just audacious or absurd. The book's protagonist, Matt, keeps having to insist to people that things matter, despite how unkempt and arbitrary the world usually appears. I'm not sure how I felt about the subject when I began writing, but by the time Matt was home again, and I was done with the book, I got the feeling he'd been onto something from the start.

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Questions and topics for discussion

1. What does Matt mean when he tells Joe, “You’re free,” as they eat breakfast in the diner?
2. In your opinion, what is the significance of the cradle?
3. Renee’s story occurs more than a decade after Matt’s, and in many ways the two characters exist in different worlds. How are their respective quests similar? How are their journeys different?
4. Why does Marissa cry on her wedding day?
5. Why do you think Matt rips the showerhead out of the wall?
6. In the novel’s first chapter, Marissa claims, “There are two kinds of people in the world. There are people who understand that everything matters and people who don’t understand that everything matters” (page 6). What does she mean by this? Is she serious? Use her statement as a way to think about the various characters in the book.

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7. How is writing poetry different for Renee than her work writing children's books? Why do you think she struggles so much with the former, and how does that struggle change in the course of the novel? How does Renee's understanding of Walt Whitman's work play a role?
8. Matt comes to the realization that "the world never just happened but rather was made by people, each and every aspect of it" (page 157). How does this realization affect his sense of personal responsibility?
9. Who was the character you most identified with at the beginning of the novel? Did that change by the conclusion of the story?
10. Why do you think that, following Matt's return, Marissa never again asked about the cradle?

Patrick Somerville's "Most Influential"

The following is a list of books, in no particular order, that influenced my work as a writer.

1. *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves
2. *Stick Out Your Tongue* by Ma Jian
3. *The Story of Philosophy* by Will Durant
4. *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut
5. *A Complicated Kindness* by Miriam Toews
6. *The Moviegoer* by Walker Percy
7. *The Dog of the South* by Charles Portis
8. *Masters of Atlantis* by Charles Portis
9. *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann
10. *A Prayer for the Dying* by Stewart O'Nan
11. *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner
12. *Absalom, Absalom!* by William Faulkner
13. *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner
14. *The Hamlet* by William Faulkner
15. *Go Down, Moses* by William Faulkner
16. *In Our Time* by Ernest Hemingway
17. *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway
18. *Descent into Hell* by Charles Williams
19. *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon
20. *Slow Learner* by Thomas Pynchon
21. *V.* by Thomas Pynchon
22. *The World According to Garp* by John Irving

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23. *Goodbye, Columbus* by Philip Roth
24. *American Pastoral* by Philip Roth
25. *Lucky Jim* by Kingsley Amis
26. *Franny and Zooey* by J. D. Salinger
27. *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
28. *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson
29. *The Keep* by Jennifer Egan
30. *Music for Torching* by A. M. Homes
31. *Carpenter's Gothic* by William Gaddis
32. *Jacob's Room* by Virginia Woolf
33. *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf
34. *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf
35. *Swann's Way* by Marcel Proust
36. *The Wapshot Chronicle* by John Cheever
37. *The Wapshot Scandal* by John Cheever
38. *The Stories of John Cheever*
39. *Sophie's Choice* by William Styron
40. *A Summons to Memphis* by Peter Taylor
41. *Plainsong* by Kent Haruf
42. *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac
43. *The Diary of a Nobody* by George and Weedon Grossmith
44. *The Heart of the Matter* by Graham Greene
45. *The Stranger* by Albert Camus
46. *White Noise* by Don DeLillo
47. *Dubliners* by James Joyce
48. *The Book of Daniel* by E. L. Doctorow
49. *The Emigrants* by W. G. Sebald
50. *Rock Springs* by Richard Ford
51. *You Remind Me of Me* by Dan Chaon
52. *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald