

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

**SO COLD
THE RIVER**

A novel by

MICHAEL KORYTA



A conversation with Michael Koryta

In many ways, So Cold the River is a departure from the Lincoln Perry series and Envy the Night. Was there something in particular that inspired you to move in a new direction?

Really, the setting itself called out for a change. I'd wanted to write a story set in this fascinating area of Indiana, utilizing its incredible history, for a long time. I just couldn't settle on a crime novel that felt as if it were making full use of the potential. I've long been a ghost story fan, love a good supernatural thriller, and it occurred to me that if I took the story in that direction I could really build on the power of the bizarre — but true — history of Springs Valley. It was intended to be a novella; as you can see, that notion fell apart pretty fast! Once I made this departure, though, I found myself feeling more at home as a writer. It was a good change.

Are there any writers who have particularly influenced you?

Dozens upon dozens. To keep it fairly short: Dennis Lehane, Michael Connelly, Stephen King, Raymond Chandler, Daniel Woodrell, William Gay, Richard Matheson, Joe Hill, Ron Rash, Stewart O’Nan, James Lee Burke.

Why did you decide to write about the West Baden Springs Hotel? Do you feel that there is something about this place that lends itself to the supernatural?

Absolutely. You have to see it to fully appreciate how surreal the place feels. You’re driving along through beautiful but unpopulated farm country, and then you follow a bend in the highway and there appears on the hill what looks to be a European castle. Once you step inside the hotel and see that incredible rotunda—the world’s largest freestanding dome from 1901 until the 1970s—it truly does take your breath away.

The best word for the hotel is *misplaced*. It just doesn’t seem to fit. So then you inquire as to how it came into existence, and the answer, ultimately, is in the region’s mineral water and its mythic reputation as a healer. Those qualities felt so wonderfully spooky to me that they paired much better with a supernatural story than a traditional crime novel.

Your novel opens with the line “You looked for the artifacts of their ambition,” which becomes Eric’s primary goal as a filmmaker. Does a similar drive influence you as a writer?

You know, that was a phrase I settled on because I simply liked the sound of it. So far it seems many readers do, too, which is pleasing. I think it does capture what a storyteller should be

trying to do. Now, Eric is telling true stories, and I'm working with fiction, but ultimately we should both be concerned with removing the layers from our characters, with determining those driving influences and ambitions and passions, because that's where you'll find the truth. Such an approach is key for journalism, of course, but it's also essential for fiction, because a story lives or dies with its character depth.

Throughout the novel, several characters confront the past. For example, Anne McKinney experiences her memories as though they happened yesterday, and Eric sees scenes from the past in his vivid hallucinations. For you, is the presence of history primarily tied to the hotel and the towns of French Lick and West Baden, or is it more ubiquitous? How does it influence your writing and the stories you tell?

It is more ubiquitous, certainly. The sort of fiction I love is fiction that demonstrates an awareness of what a deep impact the past makes, and how that impact extends from the obvious—family, friends, personal experiences—to people we've never met or even heard of but who have played a role in shaping the land we call home.

If you look at my past work, you'll see that in every one of my novels, the events of the past hang heavy over the present. In one, *Envy the Night*, this concept is even tied to the setting itself. I think *Envy the Night* has some very Gothic elements, and that book certainly built my interest in trying a supernatural Gothic. What I love about the form is the sense of direct involvement between the past and the present; they're wedded uniquely and intensely in a ghost story.

Music also plays a critical role in the story, and the boy's haunting violin solo in many ways provides a sound track to the narrative.

How does music influence your writing? Were there any artists or songs that particularly inspired you while writing So Cold the River?

A large portion of the plot comes from a single song. Joshua Bell and Edgar Meyer did a gorgeous strings piece called “Short Trip Home” that has this early-American folk sound, and while I was immediately struck by its beauty I also became kind of obsessed with imagining the story behind the song. That’s the beautiful thing about an instrumental piece; there are no lyrics telling you what it means, so you can let the imagination run. Well, I became stuck on the image of a Depression-era violin prodigy who is playing in the rotunda of the West Baden Springs Hotel, playing for coins and with his eyes squeezed shut so he can avoid facing the audience. The song itself turned into an elegy in my mind, a song for the dead, an ode to the boy’s lost parents. Obviously, that thread became hugely significant to the novel.

After suffering increasingly intense hallucinations, Eric notes that the only way he can separate reality from illusion is with his video camera. Yet in many ways his visions seem nearer to the truth than what he actually experiences. Do you think that there are times when fiction can be a better vessel for the truth than pure documentation?

Certainly. Going back thousands of years, we see countless cultures grappling with things beyond their understanding by offering stories to explain them. It’s one of the things I love about supernatural fiction as a writer: you have this opportunity to deal with a character who has to confront something in which he doesn’t even believe intellectually. The circumstances of the story force him to believe. It’s the idea that we haven’t figured it all out,

and it's dangerous to believe otherwise. I like dealing with that concept in writing.

What are you working on now? Can we expect more books like So Cold the River?

Well, the next book is called *The Cypress House*, and it certainly has a supernatural element, although I would say the core of the novel is a gangster story. It's a fathers-and-sons tale, which I always enjoy, and a love story, and, oh yeah, there's also a train car full of dead men. So, something for everyone! Ha. I'm very excited about that book. Beyond *The Cypress House*, I am returning to something perhaps more similar in tone to *So Cold the River*. It's a book called *The Ridge*, and although it's early, I'm really pleased with how the story is beginning to take shape. I'm having a lot of fun with it.



Questions and topics for discussion

1. *So Cold the River* begins with the line “You looked for the artifacts of their ambition.” What are some examples of such artifacts in the novel? Discuss what those artifacts reveal about the characters. Do you think that ambition manifests itself differently from other human drives? How and why?
2. The first time Eric Shaw sees the dome of the West Baden Hotel, he is filled with wonder. Have you ever had a similar reaction to a building or place? What was it about the sight that most deeply affected you?
3. Anne McKinney thinks to herself, “Rare was the storyteller who got trapped by reality” (page 134). Do you think that writers have a responsibility to represent events as they

actually happened? Why or why not? Do you hold writers of fiction to a different standard than you do writers of nonfiction?

4. Discuss Josiah Bradford. Is he in control of his own fate or is he stuck on a predetermined path? Have there been times in your life when you have felt as though you had no control over your circumstances? When?
5. How does ego drive each of the novel's principal characters? What are the differences among Eric's, Campbell's, and Josiah's vanity?
6. Eric begins to have trouble distinguishing his visions from reality. Have you ever had a dream that was so vivid that you mistook it for reality? Why do you think the dream affected you so strongly?
7. What is your take on Eric's relationship with Claire? Why did their marriage fall apart? What do you think will happen to them in the future?
8. As one of the oldest people in the two towns, Anne McKinney is a repository of historical information. As a self-taught meteorologist, she also looks toward the future. Can you reconcile these two different outlooks? How does history inform her predictions? What is her role in the story?
9. Discuss Josiah and Danny's relationship. Why do you think they are friends? Have you ever had an unequal friendship? Did you do anything to try to balance it?

10. Discuss the confrontation of perception with objective reality in the novel. When does the line between the two become unclear? Which do you think is more reliable: what one personally experiences or what is recorded or observed by the world?
11. What are the differences in the ways that Josiah and Eric experience their visions? Why do you think these visions occur?
12. Does *So Cold the River* convey a particular message about revenge or ambition? If so, what is it? If not, why do you think it doesn't?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Koryta is the author of seven novels, including *Envy the Night*, which won the *Los Angeles Times* Book Prize for best mystery/thriller, and the Lincoln Perry series, which has earned nominations for the Edgar, Shamus, and Quill awards and won the Great Lakes Book Award. His work has been translated into twenty languages. Koryta lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where he has worked as a newspaper reporter and private investigator, and in St. Petersburg, Florida.

. . . AND HIS MOST RECENT NOVEL

In January 2011 Little, Brown and Company will publish Michael Koryta's *The Cypress House*. Following is an excerpt from the novel's opening pages.

Advance praise for Michael Koryta's

THE CYPRESS HOUSE

"*The Cypress House* is a unique and entertaining blend of noir and paranormal suspense, with a tightly controlled supernatural thread as believable as the gunplay. Mr. Koryta is at the start of what will surely be a great career. He's now on my must-read list." —Dean Koontz

"Michael Koryta has fashioned a great character in his reluctant prophet, Arlen Wagner, a good man who ends up with an awful lot of blood on his hands before the denouement of this deliciously dark tale. Koryta is a fantastic storyteller, and the many admirers of his previous novel, *So Cold the River*, will find similar chilly pleasures awaiting them here." —Scott Smith

"*The Cypress House* is a dazzling blend of suspense, the supernatural, and superb storytelling. What a gifted writer. Michael Koryta is the real deal." —Ron Rash

"Michael Koryta is one of our new dynamos in the world of books, and in *The Cypress House* he spreads his range, wedding suspense with the supernatural in the eeriness of 1930s Florida. He uses the psychology of place to penetrate the human heart and delivers his tale of hurricanes and love and hauntings with great narrative force. Koryta's becoming a wonder we'll appreciate for a long time."

—Daniel Woodrell

I

THEY'D BEEN ON THE TRAIN for five hours before Arlen Wagner saw the first of the dead men.

To that point it had been a hell of a nice ride. Hot, sure, and progressively more humid as they passed out of Alabama and through southern Georgia and into Florida, but nice enough all the same. There were thirty-four on board the train who were bound for the camps in the Keys, all of them veterans with the exception of the nineteen-year-old who rode at Arlen's side, a boy from Jersey by the name of Paul Brickhill.

They'd all made a bit of conversation at the outset, exchanges of names and casual barbs and jabs thrown around in that way men have when they are getting used to one another, all of them figuring they'd be together for several months to come, and then things quieted down. Some slept, a few started card games, others just sat and watched the countryside roll by, fields going misty with late-summer twilight and then shapeless and dark as the moon rose like a watchful specter. Arlen, though, Arlen just listened. Wasn't anything else to do, because Paul Brickhill had an outboard motor where his mouth belonged.

As the miles and minutes passed, Brickhill alternated between explaining things to Arlen and asking him questions. Nine times out of ten, the boy answered his own questions before Arlen could so much as part his lips with a response. Brickhill had been a quiet kid when the two of them first met months earlier in Alabama, and back then Arlen believed him to be shy. What he hadn't counted on was the way the boy took to talk once he felt comfortable with someone. Evidently, he'd grown damn comfortable with Arlen.

As the wheels hammered along the rails of northern Florida, Paul Brickhill was busy telling Arlen all of the reasons this was going to be a hell of a good hitch. Not only was there the bridge waiting to be built, but all that sunshine and blue water and boats that cost more than most homes. They could do some fishing, maybe catch a tarpon. Paul'd seen pictures of tarpon that were near as long as the boats that landed them. And there were famous people in the Keys, celebrities of every sort, and who was to say they wouldn't run into a few, and . . .

Around them the men talked and laughed, some scratching out letters to loved ones back home. Wasn't anyone waiting on a letter from Arlen, so he just settled for a few nips on his flask and tried to find some sleep despite the cloaking warmth and the stink of sweating men. It was too damn hot.

Brickhill finally fell silent, as if he'd just noticed that Arlen was sitting with his eyes closed and had stopped responding to the conversation. Arlen let out a sigh, grateful for the respite. Paul was a nice enough kid, but Arlen had never been one for a lot of words where a few would do.

The train clattered on, and though night had settled, the heat didn't break. Sweat still trickled along the small of Arlen's back and held his hair to his forehead. He wished he could fall asleep;

these hot miles would pass faster then. Maybe another pull on the flask would aid him along.

He opened his eyes, tugged the lids up sleepily, and saw a hand of bone.

He blinked and sat up and stared. Nothing changed. The hand held five playing cards and was attached to a man named Wallace O'Connell, a veteran from Georgia who was far and away the loudest man in this company. He had his back turned, engaged in his game, so Arlen couldn't see his face. Just that hand of bone.

No, Arlen thought, no, damn it, not another one.

The sight chilled him but didn't shock him. It was far from the first time.

He's going to die unless I can find a way to stop it, Arlen thought with the sad, sick resignation of a man experienced with such things. Once we get down to the Keys, old Wallace O'Connell will have a slip and bash his head in on something. Or maybe the poor bastard can't swim, will fall into those waves and sink beneath them and I'll be left with this memory same as I've been left with so many others. I'd warn him if I could, but men don't heed such warnings. They won't let themselves.

It was then that he looked up, away from Wallace under the flickering lights of the train car, and saw skeletons all around him.

They filled the shadows of the car, some laughing, some grinning, some lost to sleep. All with bone where flesh belonged. The few who sat directly under a light still wore their skin, but their eyes were gone, replaced by whirls of gray smoke.

For a moment, Arlen Wagner forgot to breathe. Went cold and dizzy and then sucked in a gasp of air and straightened in the seat.

They were going to have a wreck. It was the only thing that made a bit of sense. This train was going to derail and they were all going to die. Every last one of them. Because Arlen had

seen this before, and knew damn well what it meant, and knew that —

Paul Brickhill said, “Arlen?”

Arlen turned to him. The overhead light was full on the boy’s face, keeping him in a circle of brightness, the taut, tanned skin of a young man who spent his days under the sun. Arlen looked into his eyes and saw swirling wisps of smoke. The smoke rose in tendrils and fanned out and framed the boy’s head while filling Arlen’s with terrible recollections.

“Arlen, you all right?” Paul Brickhill asked.

He wanted to scream. Wanted to scream and grab the boy’s arm but was afraid it would be cold slick bone under his touch.

We’re going to die. We’re going to come off these rails at full speed and pile into those swamp woods, with hot metal tearing and shattering all around us...

The whistle blew out shrill in the dark night, and the train began to slow.

“We got another stop,” Paul said. “You look kind of sickly. Maybe you should pour that flask out.”

The boy distrusted liquor. Arlen wet his lips and said, “Maybe,” and looked around the car at the skeleton crew and felt the train shudder as it slowed. The force of that big locomotive was dropping fast, and now he could see light glimmering outside the windows, a station just ahead. They were arriving in some backwater stop where the train could take on coal and the men would have a chance to get out, stretch their legs, and piss. Then they’d be aboard again and winging south at full speed, death ahead of them.

“Paul,” Arlen said, “you got to help me do a bit of convincing here.”

“What are you talking about?”

“We aren’t getting back on this train. Not a one of us.”

2

THEY PILED OUT OF THE CARS and onto the station platform, everyone milling around, stretching or lighting cigarettes. It was getting on toward ten in the evening, and though the sun had long since faded, the wet heat lingered. The boards of the platform were coated with swamp mud dried and trampled into dust, and out beyond the lights Arlen could see silhouetted fronds lying limp in the darkness, untouched by a breeze. Backwoods Florida. He didn't know the town and didn't care; regardless of name, it would be his last stop on this train.

He hadn't seen so many apparitions of death at one time since the war. Maybe leaving the train wouldn't be enough. Could be there was some sort of virus in the air, a plague spreading unseen from man to man the way the influenza had in '18, claiming lives faster than the reaper himself.

"What's the matter?" Paul Brickhill asked, following as Arlen stepped away from the crowd of men and tugged his flask from his pocket. Out here the sight was enough to set Arlen's hands to shaking—men were walking in and out of the shadows as they moved through the cars and down to the station platform,

slipping from flesh to bone and back again in a matter of seconds, all of it a dizzying display that made him want to sit down and close his eyes and drink long and deep on the whiskey.

“Something’s about to go wrong,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Paul said, but Arlen didn’t respond, staring instead at the men disembarking and realizing something—the moment they stepped off the train, their skin slid back across their bones, knitting together as if healed by the wave of some magic wand. The swirls of smoke in their eye sockets vanished into the hazy night air. It was the train. Yes, whatever was going to happen was going to happen to that train.

“Something’s about to go wrong,” he repeated. “With our train. Something’s going to go bad wrong.”

“How do you know?”

“I just *do*, damn it!”

Paul looked to the flask, and his eyes said what his words did not.

“I’m not drunk. Haven’t had more than a few swallows.”

“What do you mean, something’s going to go wrong?” Paul asked again.

Arlen held on to the truth, felt the words heavy in his throat but couldn’t let them go. It was one thing to see such horrors; it was worse to try and speak of them. Not just because it was a difficult thing to describe but because no one ever believed. And the moment you gave voice to such a thing was the moment you charted a course for your character that you could never alter. Arlen understood this well, had known it since boyhood.

But Paul Brickhill had sat before him with smoke the color of an early-morning storm cloud hanging in his eyes, and Arlen was certain what that meant. He couldn’t let him board that train again.

“People are going to die,” he said.

Paul Brickhill leaned his head back and stared.

“We get back on that train, people are going to die,” Arlen said. “I’m sure of it.”

He’d spent many a day trying to imagine this gift away. To fling it from him the way you might a poisonous spider caught crawling up your arm, and long after the chill lingered on your flesh you’d thank the sweet hand of Providence that you’d been given the opportunity to knock the beast away. Only he’d never been given the opportunity. No, the stark sight of death had stalked him, trailed him relentlessly. He knew it when he saw it, and he knew it was no trick of the light, no twist of bad liquor upon the mind. It was prophecy, the gift of foresight granted to a man who’d never wished for it.

He was reluctant to say so much as a word to any of the other men, knowing the response he’d receive, but this was not the sort of thing that could be ignored.

Speak loud and sharp, he thought, just like you did on the edge of a battle, when you had to get ’em to listen, and listen fast.

“Boys,” he said, getting at least a little of the old muster into his tone, “listen up, now.”

The conversations broke off. Two men were standing on the step of the train car, and when they turned, skull faces studied him.

“I think we best wait for the next train through,” he said. “There’s bad trouble aboard this one. I’m sure of it.”

It was Wallace O’Connell who broke the long silence that followed.

“What in the hell you talking about, Wagner?” he said, and immediately there was a chorus of muttered agreement.

“Something’s wrong with this train,” Arlen said. He stood tall, did his damndest to hold their eyes.

“You know this for a fact?” O’Connell said.

“I know it.”

“How do you know? And what’s wrong with it?”

“I can’t say what’s wrong with it. But something is. I got a . . . sense for these things.”

A slow grin crept across O’Connell’s face. “I’ve known some leg-pullers,” he said, “but didn’t figure you for one of them. Don’t got the look.”

“Damn it, man, this ain’t no joke.”

“You got a *sense* something’s wrong with our train, and you’re telling us it ain’t no joke?”

“Knew a widow back home who was the same way,” spoke up another man from the rear of the circle. He was a slim, wiry old guy with a nose crooked from many a break. Arlen didn’t know his name—hell, he didn’t know most of their names, and that was part of the problem. Aside from Paul there wasn’t a man in the group who’d known Arlen for any longer than this train ride.

“Yeah?” O’Connell said. “Trains talked to her, too?”

“Naw. She had the sense, just like he’s talking about. ‘Cept she got her sights from owls and moon reflections and shit like you couldn’t even imagine.”

This new man was grinning wide, and O’Connell was matching it. He said, “She was right all the time, of course?”

“Of course,” the man said, and let out a cackle. “Why, wasn’t but nine year ago she predicted the end of days was upon us. Knew it for a fact. Was going to befall us by that winter. I can’t imagine she was wrong, I just figured I missed being raptured up and that’s how I ended up here with all you sinful sons of bitches.”

The crowd was laughing now, and Arlen felt heat creeping into his face, thoughts of his father and the shame that had chased him from his boyhood home threatening his mind now. Behind him Paul Brickhill was standing still and silent, about the only one in the group who wasn’t at least chuckling. There

was a man near Wallace O'Connell whose smile seemed forced, uneasy, but even he was going along with the rest of them.

"I might ask for a tug on whatever's in that jug of your'n," O'Connell said. "It seems to be a powerful syrup."

"It's not the liquor you're hearing," Arlen said. "It's the truth. Boys, I'm telling you, I seen things in the war just like I am tonight, and every time I did, men died."

"Men died every damn day in the war," O'Connell said. The humor had drained from his voice. "And we all seen it—not just you. Some of us didn't crack straight through from what we seen. Others"—he made a pointed nod at Arlen—"had a mite less fortitude. Now save your stories for somebody fool enough to listen to them. Rest of us don't need the aggravation. There's work at the end of this line, and we all need it."

The men broke up then, drifted back to their own conversations, casting Arlen sidelong stares. Arlen felt a hand on his arm and nearly whirled and threw his fist without looking, shame and fear riding him hard now. It was only Paul, though, tugging him away from the group.

"Arlen, you best ease up."

"Be damned if I will. I'm telling you—"

"I understand what you're telling us, but it just doesn't make sense. Could be you got a touch of fever, or —"

Arlen reached out and grabbed him by his shirt collar. Paul's eyes went wide, but he didn't reach for Arlen's hand, didn't move at all as Arlen spoke to him in a low, harsh voice.

"You had smoke in your eyes, boy. I don't give a damn if you couldn't see it or if none of them could, it was there, and it's the sign of your death. You known me for a time now, and you ask yourself, how often has Arlen Wagner spoken foolish words to me? How often has he seemed addled? You ask yourself that, and then you ask yourself if you want to die tonight."

He released the boy's collar and stepped back. Paul lifted a hand and wiped it over his mouth, staring at Arlen.

"You trust me, Brickhill?" Arlen said.

"You know I do."

"Then listen to me now. If you don't ever listen to another man again for the rest of your life, listen to me now. Don't get back on that train."

The boy swallowed and looked off into the darkness. "Arlen, I wouldn't disrespect you, but what you're saying...there's no way you could know that."

"I can see it," Arlen said. "Don't know how to explain it, but I can *see* it."

Paul didn't answer. He looked away from Arlen, back at the others, who were watching the boy with pity and Arlen with disdain.

"Here's one last question for you to ask of yourself," Arlen said. "Can you afford to be wrong?"

Paul stared at him in silence as the train whistle blew and the men stomped out cigarettes and fell into a boarding line. Arlen watched their flesh melt from their bones as they went up the steps.

"Don't let that fool bastard convince you to stay here, boy," Wallace O'Connell bellowed as he stepped up onto the train car, half of his face a skull, half the face of a strong man who believed he was fit to take on all comers. "Ain't nothing here but alligators, and unless you want to be eating them come dinner tomorrow, or them eating you, you best get aboard."

Paul didn't look in his direction. Just kept staring at Arlen. The locomotive was chugging now, steam building, ready to tug its load south, down to the Keys, down to the place the boy wanted to be.

"You're serious," he said.

Arlen nodded.

"And it's happened before?" Paul said. "This isn't the first time?"

"No," Arlen said. "It is not the first time."