
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE WAY HOME

A NOVEL BY

GEORGE PELECANOS

Questions and topics for discussion

1. Why is Thomas Flynn initially disappointed in his son, Chris? What are the expectations that the parents in the novel have for their children?
2. How are Chris's values different from his father's?
3. Discuss the manner in which Amanda and Thomas Flynn approach Chris while he is in Pine Ridge. How do their styles of parenting differ? Why is Chris more responsive to his mother than to his father?
4. Flynn often imagines what it would have been like if his two-month-old daughter, Kate, had survived. Why does this make it difficult for Flynn to accept Chris for who he is?
5. The other boys at Pine Ridge call Chris "White Boy" and tell him he doesn't belong there (page 59). Unlike the others, Chris grew up in a nice suburban home with two hardworking and attentive parents. Why do you think Chris ends up at Pine Ridge with these other boys?
6. A novelist named Mr. Sampson comes in to talk to Unit Five about his book *Payback Time*, which tells a story about a group of young men much like the ones at Pine Ridge. Latimer, one of the security guards, argues that another one of Mr. Sampson's books, *Brothers in Blood*, promotes violence and disrespect, with only "ten pages of redemption in the

end,” which he claims that young men like the ones in Unit Five won’t even read (page 86). Is there a case to be made that such books promote violence, rather than a respect for authority and doing what is right? Would you agree with Lattimer that more books about “kids on the straight” are needed? Or are books like *Mr. Sampson’s* more descriptive of the reality of at-risk young adults?

7. Education plays a key role in shaping the lives of the characters throughout *The Way Home*. Ben learns to read after leaving Pine Ridge. Ali graduates from college and then joins an organization that helps at-risk teenagers get back on track. How does further education open doors for these characters? What separates them from the lesser-educated graduates of Pine Ridge, such as Lawrence and Luther?
8. When Chris and Ben find the bag of money hidden under the floorboards, why does Chris insist on leaving it behind? When Chris says, “I’m sayin, there’s no shortcut to where we’re trying to get to. Just work, every day. Same as how it is for everyone else” (page 113), what has he learned from his time in Pine Ridge and from his father?
9. Lawrence makes a key decision regarding Chris and revenge at the book’s climax. Discuss his motives. In what ways was Lawrence’s childhood different from Chris’s? What role does his childhood play in his choice to go on alone?
10. By the end of the novel, Chris is back at community college and taking a few classes. How have his life and attitude changed? What new responsibilities and obligations does he have?

George Pelecanos's favorite westerns

This piece, describing my seven favorite westerns, was originally published in *Uncut* magazine's "Magnificent Seven" column and was, by definition, meant to include seven entries. I cheated and made it eight. But even that was difficult, as there are so many westerns I like. So I have expanded the list. Enjoy.

The Magnificent Seven (1960)

A handful of professional gunmen led by black-clad Yul Brynner are hired to protect a south-of-the-border farming village from scores of bandits in John Sturges's western adaptation of Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai*. Rousing entertainment and every boy's perfect action film, with a martial Elmer Bernstein score that will haunt you to your grave. Among the seven: Steve McQueen, Robert Vaughan, Charles Bronson, and, as the knife-wielding Texican, James Coburn.

One-Eyed Jacks (1961)

A superb psychological western, sensuous, brutal, and beautifully shot. Outlaw Marlon Brando goes after his former partner (Karl Malden), now a sheriff in a coastal California town. Kubrick began the shoot but Brando took over the directing reins halfway in. The performances are outstanding, with Slim Pickens, Ben Johnson, and a truly bughouse Timothy Carey of particular note. Great jailhouse brutalization scene between

Brando and Pickens, recreated by Peckinpah twelve years later in *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence (1962)

The Searchers is the obvious choice, but this is my favorite John Ford western. It is, in many ways, his most complex and moving film. Rugged cowboy John Wayne saves city-slicker lawyer James Stewart from reprobate gunman Lee Marvin, sacrificing his own happiness and altering history in the process. Ford's tragic, noirish eulogy for a wilderness overrun by civilization was his own swan song as well; he'd never make a film this rich again. Wayne is outstanding.

Hombre (1967)

Martin Ritt's adaptation of an Elmore Leonard novel is a modern version of *Stagecoach* and an intelligent character study exploring the themes of race, heroism, cowardice, and greed. Paul Newman, blue-eyed and super cool, plays the title role, a white man raised by the Apaches who decides to save the ones he despises. Builds slowly and deliberately to a final showdown between Newman and a group of villains led by proto-badass Richard Boone. "Well now, Hombre," asks Boone, very casually, before the guns come out. "What do you suppose *hell* is gonna look like?"

Once Upon a Time in the West (1968)

Sergio Leone's operatic masterpiece is, on the surface, an epic tale of revenge, but underneath is the definitive take on the price of America's Manifest Destiny. Shot, in part, in John

Ford's beloved Monument Valley, Leone fires on all artistic cylinders, from the extraordinary opening title sequence to the last gunfight. Sound design, cinematography, and performances—by Bronson, Jason Robards, Claudia Cardinale, and especially Henry Fonda—are in harmonic balance, all brought to life by Ennio Morricone's Hendrix-meets-the-angels score. The main theme will be played at my funeral. A beautiful film.

The Wild Bunch (1969)

A band of aging outlaws who “came too late and stayed too long” make their last stand, taking on half the Mexican army in Sam Peckinpah's ode to friendship, honor, and bloody redemption. Peckinpah's stunner was a parable for Vietnam that turned peace-loving audiences on with its cathartic violence, in the process burning down the genre itself. Concludes with the Battle of Bloody Porch, perhaps the most visceral action sequence ever committed to film. Oddly enough, it's the quiet moments that stick with you. William Holden, Ernest Borgnine, Ben Johnson, and Warren Oates take the last walk, and blow it all to hell.

Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid (1973)

Peckinpah again, exploding the myth. This was a critical and commercial failure upon its release, but the years and a director's cut have given it a new life. Kris Kristofferson is the hippie-like Billy, James Coburn is the haunted Garrett, and a cast of supporting character actors drift in and out of the narrative like doomed players in a dusty dream. Rock hard, fatalistic Rudy Wurlitzer dialogue, and very hardboiled. R. G. Armstrong

and Kristofferson do the jailhouse bit. Bob Dylan does the for-the-ages score. He also plays Alias, mumbles, and throws a knife. Slim Pickens dies to “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.” Essential.

The Outlaw Josey Wales (1976)

The last great western. *Unforgiven* deservedly won the awards, but I believe that this is the one for which Clint Eastwood will be remembered. In the years following the Civil War, Eastwood traverses the Midwest, searching for the Union renegades who murdered his family. Along the way he adopts a new family of friends, misfits, and lovers, but not before spilling some righteous blood. Eastwood directs masterfully, taking over for a fired Phil Kaufman, pacing the episodic script to perfection and giving it life. Name one red-blooded guy who can’t quote stretches of dialogue from this film. “Dyin’ ain’t much of a livin’, boy.” ’Nuff said.

And:

Ride the High Country (1962)

This should have made my original list, as it is one of my favorite films of any genre. Peckinpah’s first great picture is an elegiac good-bye to the traditional western with an eye on what was to come. Randolph Scott and Joel McRae play aging gunmen who agree to transfer mine company gold into the high country of the California Sierras. With Mariette Hartley, James Drury, John Anderson, R. G. Armstrong, L. Q. Jones, and Warren Oates. Painterly cinematography by Lucian Ballard, memorable, offbeat characters, and a stunningly beautiful

ending. In Europe the title was *Guns in the Afternoon*. “I just want to enter my house justified.”

Seven Men from Now (1956)

The first of director Budd Boetticher’s many collaborations with star Randolph Scott. All are worth watching but this is the best. Low budget and running at under eighty minutes, this packs a wallop due to its airtight Burt Kennedy screenplay, the director’s use of landscape, and the dynamic interplay between the characters. Lee Marvin excels as the not-quite-villainous villain, exuding his big-cat grace and predatory sexuality to great effect. The final shootout predates Leone and was obviously a big influence on the Italian maestro, who would put his own stamp on the genre a few years later.

Hour of the Gun (1967)

John Sturges’s sequel to his own *Gunfight at the O.K. Corral* is one of the finest revisionist westerns. James Garner plays Wyatt Earp as a cold-eyed killer; his draw is quick and his aim is true. Many actors have chewed into the role of Doc Holiday in its various screen incarnations, but Jason Robards locates the humanity of the character and makes it his own. Standouts in the supporting cast are Robert Ryan (as Ike Clanton), William Windom, Steve Inhat, Monte Markham, Albert Salmi, and a young Jon Voight as Curly Bill Brocius. John Sturges keeps the camera low, shooting up and mythologizing the players against the big sky and mountains. He also stages a hell of a gunfight. The cinematography is by Lucian Ballard. The Jerry Goldsmith score is one of the best ever composed for a western film.

Monte Walsh (1970)

Directed by noted cinematographer William A. Fraker, *Monte Walsh* is based on the novel by Jack Schaefer, who also wrote *Shane*. Noted for its depiction of the passing of the cowboy way of life, it is also a quiet ode to male friendship and honor. The scenes between the men on the Slash Y Ranch are incredibly rich. Lee Marvin (as Monte Walsh) and Jack Palance (as Chet) give the performances of their careers. A little-known film that I cannot recommend highly enough. With Jeanne Moreau, Mitch Ryan, Jim Davis, Michael Conrad, and Bo Hopkins. “I rode down the gray.”

The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (1966)

When I land on this on television, no matter where it is in the narrative, I always stay with it and watch it to the end. I suppose there are “better” films, but there are few so consistently entertaining. Critics did not get Sergio Leone early in his career, but the moviegoers understood, even if they could not intellectualize it: they were watching populist art. There are too many extraordinary scenes to mention, but the wordless sequence where Blondie (Clint Eastwood) gives a dying soldier the last couple of drags off his cigar, Morricone’s mournful cue (“Morti di un soldato”) playing in the background, never fails to astonish. Here, in the swish-pan graveyard scene, and in the final shootout, the power of cinema has rarely been so bold. With Lee Van Cleef as Angel Eyes and a mind-blowing Eli Wallach as Tuco, “otherwise known as the Rat.” Epic.