
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THE TERROR OF LIVING

A Novel by

URBAN WAITE

CREATING TERROR IN FICTION:
URBAN WAITE ON WRITING HIS FIRST NOVEL

I just want to get it out there . . . for the final time . . . I've never run drugs. I suppose it's a compliment in some ways that I've gotten this question so many times. It's nice to know the story of Phil Hunt and Bobby Drake is that believable. That a novel like mine can so thoroughly take the reader to a setting, twisting reality in ways that make it seem absolutely plausible and possibly even true. Well, at least, I've decided it's a compliment.

The truth about the whole thing is that everything written in *The Terror of Living* is fictional. A few places do exist in the real world—the prison in Monroe and the jail downtown with the covered walkway seven stories up are real places, but not ones anyone would want to visit.

But to get back to drug running, what research I did on the subject was limited to the task at hand. Namely, trying to get Phil Hunt through a series of days that should have otherwise killed him. I had a lot of fun with the text of this book, I enjoyed my time with these characters, and at some point maybe I'll even do it again.

That being said, this novel isn't about drug running, not really, not in its core. It's a story about living up to your potential, about dealing with your past, and hoping that someday you can look back on your life and feel satisfied. None of these characters has lived an ideal life. I don't know where those exist, or why anyone would ever want to write about a story like that, or be engaged by characters like those.

In many ways, who I was during my time writing about Phil

Hunt and Bobby Drake defined where these characters ended up, what conversations they had, and the adventures they seemed so willing to take. Pull up the roots of Hunt and Drake and they'll lead back to me; Grady, on the other hand, who knows? When I think about writing *Terror*, that's as honest a statement as I can make on the subject, because while I certainly do my fair share of observing other people, I think the most observed and criticized subject I have to work with is my own life.

Part of what I'm talking about here is that while I'm not a known felon, I've felt desperate in the past. I've wanted things to work out in the most miraculous of ways. I've had my hopes dashed, I've recovered, I've gone on, hoping still for something that I know is possibly unreachable. These are the things that define us all and ended up going into the story of Hunt and Drake.

I was twenty-eight years old when I wrote *Terror*. I wasn't young enough to believe anymore that life gradually improves the older one gets, and I wasn't old enough yet to have accepted that either. There was a lot that changed for me in the year leading up to that moment. I was working a full-time job as a waiter and in my spare time writing short stories before I had to go to work. I was hopeful in many regards. Fifteen of those stories had been published in small literary journals; I was receiving grants from society clubs and using those grants to pay for my mortgage while I went away for weeks and months at a time to work on my writing. Thanks also to the generous support of universities and artist retreats. Life was good, but I was still living a paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle, where a night out on the town seemed like an extravagance, and most dinners were grazed from whatever chef took pity on me that night.

It was in the Vermont mountains, at one of these artist retreats, that *Terror* truly was born. The mean temperature outside was

near -10°F every day, so cold that you could feel the hairs in your nostrils rattling around like icicles when the wind blew. I had never experienced anything like that, and the environment and mood of the place lent themselves to my already desperate hope that I would get something accomplished with what little time I had left. Because there was a definite idea in my head, after the year that had preceded my time there, that if something was going to happen it needed to happen then, right there in those mountains, before my month was up and I had to return to reality.

I did a lot of stomping around in the snow that month, I did a lot of drinking as well, and talking about writing. The time was good for me, it kept me on track. But most helpful was simply the cold outside and the feeling of having nowhere to go. I stayed in my little studio for much of the time, sitting at a desk with my old Dell computer in front of me, and its one loose key that always seemed to pop out just as I began to hit my rhythm.

How I did it, and how I kept myself interested, was that I made myself a deal. I would write ten pages a day for thirty days and by the time I came down from the mountain and went back to work, I would have a novel. I would have something complete, something to work on, where before I had had only time enough to work on short stories.

Already it was a daunting task, and I went into it with a definite fear that I would fail, and in this I found a bit of strength. I've never been one who accepts failure well, always wanting to improve, always hoping for something better. This all went into the novel. Drake began to develop. His fears of the past became my fears. Hunt's desires for something better became my own. Both men wanting nothing more than just to dig themselves up out of the graves they'd found themselves buried in. I hope I succeeded.

I remember rounding the halfway point in the book sometime

in the middle of that month and feeling a definite relief. Usually, it seems to me, this is where the failure will come if it's coming. You can feel the doubt creeping into the back of your mind, pressing itself outward into the room. "Can I make it another hundred and fifty pages? Is that even possible?" But this never happened. There were certainly a few scenes where I caught myself laughing, either in desperation or fear, wondering if anyone would ever want to publish a book like mine and thinking to myself if they did they'd have to be crazy.

Well, I made it through that kitten scene, and I don't know if I'll ever be the same. It changed something in me, it helped me along, it said to me that this was all fiction and that writing a book like mine was supposed to be fun, so have a good time with it. And what a good time it's been. I hope you had fun.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the relationship between crime and law in the novel? Are the law-abiding citizens like Bobby Drake more appealing than those committing the crimes, like Grady or Hunt? Or vice versa?
2. What role does the landscape of the Pacific Northwest play in *The Terror of Living*?
3. Frustrations of the past and present come to the fore as motivators in this novel. Do you think that's typical of the human experience?
4. Who was your favorite character? Why?
5. Are Drake and Hunt "even"? Is there still unfinished business between them?
6. What cut of meat is Grady's favorite and why?
7. From what we know of Drake and the events of the novel, has he reconciled himself with his father's past?
8. Given his past, what does the future hold for Phil Hunt? Now that he is free, will he raise horses like he has always wanted, or will he return to smuggling?

URBAN WAITE'S SUGGESTED READING

Cormac McCarthy's *No Country for Old Men* and *Blood Meridian*

These two books together changed the way I saw violence in literature. I doubt very much that I would have written anything like *The Terror of Living* had I not first read *Blood Meridian* and then *No Country for Old Men*. McCarthy gave these characters a certain elegance, even in the face of great pain—a quality that seems to escape many writers.

Raymond Carver's *Cathedral* and *Where I'm Calling From*
Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* and *Rock Springs*

I find it hard not to talk about Carver when talking about Ford. Both meant a great deal to me in my young life as a writer, trying as best as I could to find characters that clicked with my sense of self and the people I wanted to write about. Characters who worked blue-collar jobs, eating meals out of lunch pails, while any hope for the future always seemed a little too far away.

I first read Carver when I was in my late teens. A friend's dad gave me a copy of *Cathedral* and I realized not only that the characters in Carver's collection were similar to me, they might as well have lived down the street. So it was no surprise to me when I later learned that Ford and Carver had been friends at one point. One much younger than the other, but their stories just the same, making wonderment out of the normality of life.

Rick Bass's *In the Loyal Mountains*

There's something to be said for writing done well, and in this book Rick Bass does an amazing job. These are simple stories about characters with simple means. Most wanting to live off in the mountains, as they just try to get by.

Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers*

If there's some crazy in *The Terror of Living*, I took it from *Dog Soldiers*. I read this book a few years before many of the others on this list, and it was one of the first books of literature that caught me off guard. *Dog Soldiers* had won the National Book Award, but the content seemed as base as any grocery store paperback. Reading these pages changed something in me, it opened up a world that had previously been unexplored, and out came a few crazy characters that I truly admired.

Pete Dexter's *Paris Trout* and *Deadwood*

In the same reading fit that brought me to *Dog Soldiers*, so too did *Paris Trout* come to me. The premise seems simple, but when it comes down to the actual writing and development of the characters, there is nothing simple here. A story about the changing times in a southern community, where a courtroom-style drama is nothing like you would expect.

When I came to *Deadwood*, I was again surprised by the strength of Dexter's writing. The characters were very much alive in my mind, and their portrayal in Dexter's hands is certainly something to behold.

Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*

Please don't see the movie, if you haven't already. There's something magical going on in Ondaatje's prose. The way he controls the emotions of his characters, pushing them forward then pulling them back. The story of these four, all desirous of those things that are just out of reach, either youth, history, the past, or in some sense the truth.

Keri Hulme's *The Bone People*

Though I grew up taking hikes into the Cascades around Seattle, backpacking and camping most weekends, I'd never read prose so closely related to the way I saw nature around me, as if just by reading the pages of Hulme's novel I had begun somehow to speak a private language. That this novel is about working-class people in a small Maori community in New Zealand certainly didn't hurt either. A fascinating read.

Tom Franklin's *Poachers*, *Smonk*, and *Hell at the Breach*

Here is another series of books by a writer I greatly admire. Soon after deciding I wanted to write a book like *Terror*, I had the opportunity to read *Poachers*. The result after reading the novella at the end of the collection was a sense of freedom. Here was a person writing in the "literary" sense, while at the same time maintaining the action and suspense of other genres. I was impressed, to say the least, and I realized I had met a writer who I simply wanted to learn from, trying as best as I could to understand how he was succeeding in such a glorious way. The rest of the year as I worked to edit *Terror*, I read through *Smonk* and then *Hell at the Breach*.

William Gay's *I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down*

This collection of stories is simply magnificent. It may be my favorite collection yet. Every story a complete history of who these characters are, how they have arrived in the present of that particular plot, all of them three-dimensional, and completely realized. William Gay's sentences seem as twisted and beautiful as poetry, while each word becomes as solid as stone.

John Casey's *Spartina*

I am very jealous of this book. In simple language Casey is able to give such depth to his characters that I read through this novel in no more than three days. Racing toward the end so that I might pick it up again and begin all over. The story of a man simply trying to raise enough money to support his family and see his dreams realized has been one of my most memorable reading experiences to date.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

Need I say much about Hemingway? He lived his life the way he wanted to and put it down on the page. I'm pretty sure that *The Sun Also Rises* is more nonfiction than fiction, written in straightforward language and crisp, sharp sentences that I've always admired. *The Sun Also Rises* in its simplest form is a story about the things we want but will never have. While *For Whom the Bell Tolls* may be one of my favorite chase novels, if I can call it that. Beautiful language and an amazing plot, as time drips away from all of them, never to return.

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

At the core of all good novels is an amazing family bond. This book has that, or rather desires it, all the while creating a mysticism that astounds me every time I go back through its pages.

Graham Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, *The End of the Affair*, and *The Quiet American*

When I was in my first novel workshop, an instructor gave us *The Quiet American* and told us all that if we wanted to learn how to write novels, read Graham Greene. I've read many of his books, certainly not all of them, but *The Power and the Glory*, *The End of the Affair*, and *The Quiet American* have been my favorites. And I will say that if you want to learn how to write novels, read Graham Greene.

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM BACK BAY BOOKS

The Brave

A Novel

BY NICHOLAS EVANS

“Well-written, thought-provoking. . . Nicholas Evans now brings readers *The Brave*, another first-rate story but with a decidedly different twist.”
—Sybil Downing, *Denver Post*

“In his first novel in five years Evans displays a sure hand at drawing characters and their motivations and settings as diverse as a gloomy boarding school, glamorous Hollywood, and the wide-open spaces of the West. This should appeal to all lovers of good storytelling.”
—Dan Forrest, *Library Journal*

Old Border Road

A Novel

BY SUSAN FRODERBERG

“This is a Western transformed by its focus on a young woman. . . Katherine has a raw poetic voice that makes the tale an arresting incantation of longing and regret.” —Ron Charles, *Washington Post*

“Ms. Froderberg superbly draws on the Sonoran Desert’s singular features to highlight Katherine’s changing emotions. . . The hard lesson of *Old Border Road* is that there are endless enticements that lead men to dishonor.”
—Sam Sacks, *Wall Street Journal*



Back Bay Books • Available wherever paperbacks are sold

ALSO AVAILABLE FROM BACK BAY BOOKS

Saints and Sinners

Stories

BY EDNA O'BRIEN

“Edna O’Brien writes the most beautiful, aching stories of any writer, anywhere.” —Alice Munro

“There is no Irish writer who compares in terms of style, stamina, depth, or meaning.”

—Colum McCann, author of *Let the Great World Spin*

Room

A Novel

BY EMMA DONOGHUE

“An astounding, terrifying novel. . . . It’s a testament to Donoghue’s imagination and empathy that she is able to fashion radiance from such horror.” —*The New Yorker*

“Donoghue brings her story to a powerful close that feels exactly right. This is a truly memorable novel. . . . It presents an utterly unique way to talk about love.”

—Aimee Bender, *New York Times Book Review*



Back Bay Books • Available wherever paperbacks are sold

AVAILABLE FROM MULHOLLAND BOOKS

The Bayou Trilogy

*Under the Bright Lights • Muscle for the Wing •
The Ones You Do*

BY DANIEL WOODRELL

Collected for the first time in a single volume—three early works of crime fiction by a major American novelist.

“A backcountry Shakespeare. . . . The inhabitants of Daniel Woodrell’s fiction often have a streak that’s not just mean but savage; yet physical violence does not dominate his books. What does dominate is a seasoned fatalism. . . . Woodrell has tapped into a novelist’s honesty, and lucky for us, he’s remorseless that way.”

—*Los Angeles Times*

“Daniel Woodrell writes with an insistent rhythm and an evocative and poetic regional flavor.”

—*The New Yorker*

“Woodrell writes books so good they make me clench my fists in jealousy and wonder.”

—*Esquire*

“What people say about Cormac McCarthy goes double for Daniel Woodrell. Possibly more.”

—*New York*



Mulholland Books • Available wherever books are sold