
BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

THIS
BRIGHT
RIVER

A NOVEL BY

PATRICK SOMERVILLE

A note from the author

Just last night, a friend asked where I'd gotten the idea for *This Bright River*, and I froze up, thinking of my uncle Joel's cabin, and the woods, and being there alone for a few days back in my twenties. I'm not a very good pitch-artist — I usually end up rambling whenever somebody asks me to describe a book I've written. But *This Bright River* is particularly difficult to talk about in terms of "the idea" because I spent so long *kind of* thinking about it before I actually sat down to write it. Maybe I just should have said, "Love," and then all of us could have gone on drinking.

Instead I told her, after thinking for a second, "The woods around my uncle's cabin," as it seemed as true as anything else I might have said.

Thirty-five years ago, my uncle Joel built a cabin in the wilderness of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and when I was twenty-four, during a difficult time in my life, I asked him for the keys and headed north to spend some time there. More than anything, I just wanted to be *away*. I didn't want to think so much as be alone.

I spent most of my time there reading, writing, and playing guitar. No phone, no internet, no electricity, no people. And for a few days it was everything I wanted: woods, quiet, and peace.

Then the thunderstorm came.

The clouds rolled in over the horizon near dusk, and I remember noting how different it was to experience the early rumblings of big weather having no idea just how big it was going to be. No predictions beforehand, no safety of analysis. Just clouds and

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noise. I went outside to feel the wind and smell the air, attracted to something, but I found myself afraid to go more than fifty feet from the cabin. Lightning struck pretty close. I saw the gash of light come and go, then looked back up at the sky, then looked back at the cabin, and there was the moment: for the first time in my life, I realized that a storm, in the middle of summer, could kill a person. How had I not known that before? The thought opened a door in my heart, froze me there in the woods just as the rain was coming. Never had I felt the beauty and the monstrous chaos of nature all at once. You can't have just one or the other. The world is always both.

I ran inside. The storm raged throughout the night as I sat safe and warm within the cabin. The feeling passed and I soon found a wind-up radio in an old dusty cabinet. There was a Bob Dylan retrospective on, and I listened for an hour, and soon the rain had stopped.

I do remember thinking, though, as I finally lay down to sleep: I should write a book about that feeling.

This essay was originally published on the NOOK Blog and is reprinted with permission from the publication.

A conversation with Patrick Somerville

The author of *This Bright River* discusses sharing a sense of humor with Ben Hanson, writing about Chicago, and the importance of long conversations, with Ella Christoph of Newcity Lit.

I feel like *The Cradle* is so different from your other works. After reading them, I wanted to see if maybe there was some joke I was missing out on, because it seems like you have this sense of humor and wit and nerdiness that wasn't in *The Cradle*.

I've never thought about the three on one side of the line and *The Cradle* on the other, but I will say that in *The Cradle*, I definitely was thinking about some things before I wrote it that led it to seem a little bit different. I have this strange relationship with humor, and part of me thinks that you can't really get to real, authentic sentiment with too much humor running around in a book — and not just humor, but the tally of attempts at humor. Once that gets super-high, I feel like the reader is just in a different place and not ready to be emotionally vulnerable in the same way.

So I had struggled after I wrote my first book of stories to just write a novel, and I had tried a couple different tacks. One was very much a mystery that was a disaster, and it was bad for all sorts of reasons. One was sort of a coming-of-age, but it was really voicey, really jokey, it was very much about the contemporary world, and maybe closer to that thing you're thinking about. But I wrote that and I was like, this works in some ways but it doesn't feel emotionally relevant

to me. I just had this moment, and I was like, “How long can I be cute without tackling something more difficult?”

So that was the spirit from which I wrote *The Cradle*. I didn’t plan for it to be my first novel or anything, but I just told myself to lay off with the humor and lay off with imposing my attitude about a lot of things, and just tell the story much closer to like a folk song, something with earnest emotions and straightforward fidelity. Because I feel like for people of the internet era, the emotional authenticity and straightforward earnest communication about it is elusive, so I wanted to write a book that embraced that a little more. But I feel that, all that said, *The Cradle* is kind of funny too. I feel like it’s not hilarious, but it’s recognizably me.

It’s a bigger-picture sense of humor, without so many one-liners.

No one-liners, right. That was what I had told myself to stop doing. I feel like it’s wry — that was what I was trying to do with some of the things that the characters say. It’s more subtle, I guess. But it sounds like you’re saying you don’t like *The Cradle* but you like the other three.

I have to be honest and say that *The Cradle* was my least favorite of them. But it also made me feel that now that I have some more perspective on other things that you’ve written, it might make me see some things that I missed out on when I read *The Cradle*.

You always try to grow with each book, to push yourself into new areas artistically and emotionally. I was at an art colony in Virginia, and I was having dinner with this guy who hated sarcasm. He hated all sarcasm, all irony in communication, all sarcasm, everything. And he just said, “Why would you ever say something that was not the thing that you mean to say? Why would you ever

say ‘Nice sweater’ and mean ‘Your sweater sucks?’” He said, “That fundamentally does not make sense to me. Why not just tell people what you think?” And I was like, I’m sort of sick of the way my generation communicates anyway, and there was some truth to what he was saying. So I went with that idea.

But tell me in fifteen years if *The Cradle* is still lowest on the list of those four, because I feel like *The Universe in Miniature in Miniature* makes so much sense to people under thirty, and then no sense to people who liked *The Cradle* a lot too, which was typically people who were in their forties or fifties. It was strange, it was not my intention, but it seems like different age groups liked different books.

You have a son. Was he in the picture when you wrote *The Cradle*?

No, he wasn’t, and my wife wasn’t pregnant. But what I think was going on, which is often the case, is I was thinking about the time at which she would be pregnant or would have a kid, or I was thinking about fatherhood in the abstract. Just like in *The Universe in Miniature in Miniature*, I feel like so many of those stories are just about worrying about the future, worrying about environmental collapse or whatever. All of the books I feel like are me worrying about shit that’s coming.

So were you wary when you started *This Bright River*? Were you like, I don’t want to just be jokey the whole time and I want to be able to sustain this longer?

I think because it’s in the first person and because of who Ben was as a narrator, I think some of that just automatically came back, because his voice more closely resembles mine than the narrator of *The Cradle*. And I had also written *The Universe in Miniature in Miniature* in between, and I felt like I found a better balance there

than in my first book. I knew too the subject matter of *This Bright River* was super-serious at times, and that, in its own way, would carry some of the weight of my desire for the book to be serious, and it could still have that tone that you're talking about.

It almost demands having some humor.

Yeah, because it would be unbearable otherwise. Because the subject matter, on paper, is the worst. It's like the worst things I could think of, basically. So it would be really hard to digest without a little bit of whatever that is.

Have you always been into puzzles and riddles?

Puzzles and riddles, not that much. The way that I'm like Ben, like halfway there, is standardized tests and games, the way in which he likes games. But that character is like the next step, where he's creating puzzles and riddles, and I've never done anything like that. But I always was interested, when I was a little kid, in the idea of making video games. So the puzzle thing just seemed like a natural extension for someone like that. And something that could help me put the book together too, like build the book around some bigger ideas — to build the book like a puzzle in a way.

Were you or are you a big video-game nerd?

Definitely not anymore, no — not since having a baby and being married and work and things. But I played a lot of video games when I was a kid, definitely, and through college. I never played *Myst*, though, which seems like it is closer to what Ben is interested in. He has a different sensibility in that way.

I haven't played enough video games to say if *This Bright River* feels video game-like, but to me it felt cinematic, especially

during the scenes of violence. I felt like I was watching a movie of it happening.

Maybe there are three major moments — the Wayne conversation and in Lauren's story and at the end — and I think all three of those were a little bit different. But I think the end part, when they're actually being pursued by somebody, and there's that kind of drama going on, part of me was thinking of that in terms of games, and of how video games look and feel. But I feel like that naturally happens when you have people doing things, when you have that much action. In our brains, somehow it just starts to feel cinematic because we're so used to seeing that represented visually.

Both in *The Cradle* and *This Bright River* you have a character going on a quest. At first I thought it felt kind of like a movie. And then I realized, that's not really like a movie, that's how books have been since *The Odyssey*. But maybe in contemporary media, we see quests happening on film more than in books.

Every Charles Portis book is a novel, and except for *Masters of Atlantis*, they're all pretty much quests. It still gets used, definitely, and then depending on how liberal you can get with the definition, you can say they all are, or all books are mysteries. I think *The Cradle* definitely is a straightforward quest. But I think in *This Bright River*, I put it in there, but I wanted to break that and make it seem like it was going to be that way, but then collapse into something more nonlinear in the second half.

There were definitely challenges he had to confront and be tested. But it's not like in *The Odyssey*, where Odysseus can just return home to Penelope and then everything ends well.

Right, if that book is about anything, it's about the answers not being clean. We set out on quests hoping to solve all our problems, and then it happens to be more complicated than that.

You're from Wisconsin but now living in Chicago. How did it feel to write about Wisconsin while in Chicago?

It feels natural. It definitely did with *The Cradle*, just because it was so hard for me to figure out how to put a simple novel together that the idea of also doing all this research or imagining a different landscape — it just seemed like one more impossible thing to do. I was like, it's just going to be in a place I can imagine. All those years of driving around in high school, of growing up — it's just sort of there, already. It didn't feel hard. I haven't written about Chicago a lot, but it's much harder for me to close my eyes and imagine what a basic street would look like, or something simple, just because it's not where I'm from. I feel like that's changing a little bit.

But you write about Chicago in *The Universe in Miniature in Miniature* a bit.

I feel like I had to work harder. Like when they walk into that hot-dog stand, and when Tom is walking around in the Viagra Triangle, I definitely had to go there and look and think about it as opposed to just tearing off this or that.

You didn't grow up in Chicago, so you don't have a natural instinct for what Chicago teenagers would do.

Right, definitely not that. My wife did, so sometimes I ask her things. But I've been here for seven years now, so it's getting a little easier.

While I was reading *This Bright River*, I kept on thinking about *Freedom* by Jonathan Franzen. I feel like he has a similar wit about family life and concern with greater issues in our society today.

I haven't read *Freedom*. I have read the first chapter where the kid is pushing back against his father and becoming a capitalist, and I thought it was sort of amazing, that first chapter. And I haven't not read it for any reason other than that I just never sat down with it.

I loved *The Corrections* and thought that was a really good book — that particular combination of, like you said, wit and relevance and playfulness in the background. Like suddenly Chip is making a country and working on a country's website, and he's in an SUV in the middle of nowhere; I thought that was an amazing tangent.

Were there any books in particular that influenced you while writing *This Bright River*?

The Pale King, the David Foster Wallace posthumous book, I thought that was totally amazing. I was reading that at the time I was writing the book, and I also read *You Don't Love This Man* by Dan DeWeese. It's a book that has amazing conversations — really long ones — and that's true of *The Pale King* too. I love conversations and books; I will read a conversation for seventy pages. I like them more than even the standard reader is interested in them, and I don't know what it is. *The Pale King* has an incredible conversation in it toward the end. *You Don't Love This Man* is also full of these amazing layered conversations, so one thing I thought, when I set out to write this book, was that I would be open to having really long conversations. There are a couple chapters that

are just conversations, so that was definitely a thing I told myself I wanted to explore. Which is probably another reason the book ended up so long. The plot could have unfolded much quicker, but I was like, “No, I’m going to stay here, and have these people talk to each other for twenty pages.”

Did you have to pay close attention to how people have conversations or did it come naturally?

It always felt pretty natural to me. In the liberal studies minor I did at the University of Wisconsin–Madison, there was this habit among the teachers in the program of having us write dialogues for our finals. Like classical style, almost like scripts with two thinkers debating one another about an issue. I loved that, and I wrote so many finals in blue books. It’s weird, you’re not writing essays — you’re writing conversations. To do it right, to get a good grade, you knew there had to be ideas embedded in each voice, back and forth, and then you were just sussing out the details around them. Whatever that is was carried over to my fiction writing. So now when I have two people talking to each other, they’re almost always debates, on some level. I don’t really know if that’s how people quite talk in the real world, but it seems interesting to me.

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Questions and topics for discussion

1. In the first scene of the novel, two unnamed men have a sinister encounter after a night at the bar. How did the fact that these men went unnamed affect the way you read the scene? Once you knew who the unnamed men were, did you have the impulse to re-read the opening scene? How was your experience of the novel shaped by this choice, and how would the experience have been different — better or worse — if the men had been named right from the start?
2. Lauren and Ben seem like they've been raised and educated to handle whatever obstacles the world might throw their way. Yet both return to their hometown as adults to heal from what could be called self-inflicted damage. How did all the preparation and seeming stability of their youths leave them ill-prepared? Were they ill-prepared or foolish or unlucky?
3. “Novels are boring,” Ben’s friend Jeremy tells him. Later, Jeremy points out, “everybody needs stories.” Do you think the structure of this novel, and the experiences of the characters, refutes or supports these statements? What does Jeremy mean and which message is *This Bright River* aiming to validate?
4. Lauren says, “There is one big river, Ben, and in that sense, yes, each moment in time exists and will continue to exist. But we don’t get to swim in that. . . . Instead, we swim in our own eddies.” Will Besco think how the “quiet river” in his mind

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“sometimes overflowed . . . when the rains were heavy or the snowfall in some other county, or country, or season led from this to that.” The cabin in the Upper Peninsula is located on the Bright River; the name of the video game references “river”; St. Helen’s is on a river; “river” is in the title of the novel. Why are rivers such an attractive and appropriate central image for not just the landscape but also the themes of the novel?

5. Patrick Somerville’s debut novel *The Cradle* is tightly focused on the points of view of just two characters while *This Bright River* is more kaleidoscopic. Why is *This Bright River* written through the eyes of so many different characters? How does this structure echo the other themes in the novel like, for instance, the piece-meal, level by level way a video game unfolds for the player?
6. In an interview about *This Bright River* Patrick Somerville said, “Families are what we are, in one way, and they are what we don’t want to be, in another way.” What does he mean? How is this true for Ben, for Lauren, for the other characters?
7. The story takes a different turn in the last act when Lauren’s ex-husband, Will Besco, enters the scene. The suspense intensifies, the pacing of the narrative starts to mirror a thriller, and an exploration of madness and obsession take center stage. Does the earlier focus of the novel on the multi-faceted nature of storytelling, puzzles, language, truth, etc. change the threat of Will’s madness? Does Will’s breakdown or the complicated lens through which Somerville tells his story reveal anything about the nature of evil?
8. Both Lauren and Ben come home to St. Helen’s to begin again and reckon with their demons. Are Ben and Lauren’s efforts ultimately successful? Can we ever leave the past behind and begin with a clean slate?

If you have any questions for Ben Hanson,
you can reach him by e-mail at
hanson.ben3@gmail.com.

Also by **PATRICK SOMERVILLE**

THE CRADLE

“A magical debut novel executed with grace and precision.”

—Mary Houlihan, *Chicago Sun-Times*

“Poignant and funny . . . a well-wrought, often comical exploration of contemporary fatherhood.”

—Joseph Peschel, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“*The Cradle* emerges swift and cinematic, an epic story told in a series of artfully curated, wonderfully rendered scenes.”

—Dean Bakopoulos, *New York Times Book Review*

“A lovely, finely wrought tale of unlikely redemption. . . . Somerville has many gifts, not the least of which is the ability to sketch his characters with firm strokes that leave no doubt as to their distinct and varied humanity. The resulting work is nothing short of a surprising treat.”

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