



## **Neverhome**

**by Laird Hunt**

### **Reading Group Guide**

#### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

- 1) From the opening sentence, we know that the narrator, Ash, chooses to fight in the Civil War instead of her husband. By the end of the novel, we recognize there may be several different reasons for her choice. What was her greatest motivation for leaving? What do you believe *Ash herself* believes about her choice?
- 2) Does *Neverhome* change your understanding of the Civil War?
- 3) As represented in *Neverhome*, what is the role of women in the Civil War, and the relationship between women and violence in particular? What might be the larger implications of Ash donning a woman's dress to evade and then kill the bandits?

- 4) Describe Ash's relationships with the various women in the novel, such as Neva, Ash's mother, and the Colonel's wife. How are the relationships similar? How are they different? What do her interactions with each reveal about Ash?
- 5) Discuss the role of men in Ash's life, both before and during the War.
- 6) Why do you believe the Colonel takes such a particular interest in Ash? Discuss the squirrel-hunting, the battle midway through the novel with the Colonel's kinsman, and the visit in the psychiatric hospital, in particular.
- 7) How does Ash feel about her husband and her marriage? Do those feelings change when she returns from the war? Are those feelings changed by the end of the book?
- 8) The narrative is arranged as a series of alternations between intensity and calm, horror and grace, reaction and reflection. How does this structure clarify your understanding of war, and deepen your understanding of Ash?
- 9) Go back through the novel and highlight the letter-writing efforts of Ash and others—what role do letters play in the story? Most fundamentally, what does the act of letter-writing perform for the novel's characters?
- 10) How do you interpret the symbolic import of Weatherby's greenhouse? How might his damaged grandson be connected to its construction?
- 11) What is Ash's motivation for telling her story? Is *Neverhome* a confessional, and if so, is there more than one reason for Ash to confess? What acts, both major and minor, impel her to tell her story? Does Ash actually understand or know herself?

#### **ON WRITING *NEVERHOME*:**

The seed for *Neverhome* was planted eighteen years ago when my wife bought me a copy of *An Uncommon Soldier: The Civil War Letters of Sarah Rosetta Wakeman*. That seed eventually grew into a very short story that tells the tale of two women who go off to fight in the war. The women, close friends, are initially swept up in the adventure, only to be ground down by the horror of the conflict. One of the women is captured and discovered for what she is and made to suffer in the worst way at the hands of her fellow prisoners. Her friend is waiting for her when she is finally released. This is how "A Pine Forest", narrated by the friend who is waiting, concludes:

*We walked the roads until she one day got her voice back. "Now that was something and goddamn that was something and goddamn all of it to hell," she said. She said this as we were walking through a pine forest. Every step we took through that forest lifted up something soft and special to smell. You could have just laid down on that ground and gone right to sleep or died. There we went a walking. We turned a corner and come upon a pool of water. When we stepped up close to drink we saw it was shallow and full of dead crickets. She looked at those crickets and the tears came welling up. "Every one of them is dead," she said. We cried and cried.*

Some time after writing those words, I chanced to read a comment by Tony Horwitz, author of the excellent *Confederates in the Attic, Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*, to the effect that there was still much unturned earth in the history of that conflict, so many stories still to be told. This made me think again of all those women—historians place the number at around four hundred, though it was probably more—who like Sarah Wakeman and the imagined characters in “A Pine Forest” went to war and fought for their country, even though their country didn’t want them, or only wanted them as long as they could preserve their identity as men. What, I asked myself, would prompt a young woman to leave home when no one expected her to, to travel far away and face not only bullets and cannon balls, but also the fear of discovery? What well of joys and sorrows might underpin such a decision and would this person, at the end of her perilous journey, return home again to drink from it? I thought these things and others and took a deep breath. For I had suddenly caught my first glimpse of Ash Thompson, pulling on a pair of sturdy shoes and setting off for war. And I knew I had to gather up my own courage and follow her.

#### **EXTRAORDINARY PRAISE FOR *NEVERHOME*:**

“A spare, beautiful novel, so deeply about America and the language of America that its sentences seem to rise up from the earth itself. Laird Hunt had me under his spell from the first word of *Neverhome* to the last. Magnificent.”

—Paul Auster, author of *The New York Trilogy* and *Report from the Interior*

“The Civil War has given us so many great literary works that I couldn't have imagined a new fictional approach that was both stunningly original and yet utterly natural, even inevitable. But this is just what Laird Hunt brilliantly delivers in his new novel. The key is his central character: in her voice, her personality, her yearning, she deeply touches our shared and enduring humanity. *Neverhome* is

masterful work by one of our finest writers.”

—Robert Olen Butler, author of the Pulitzer-Prize winning *A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain*

“Laird Hunt's new novel is a beguiling and evocative story about love and loss, duty and deceit. Through the assured voice of his narrator and the subtle beauty of his writing, *Neverhome* took me on a journey so thoroughly engrossed that there were times the pages seemed to turn themselves.”

—Kevin Powers, author of *The Yellow Birds*