



READING GROUP GUIDE

the
string
diaries

BY

STEPHEN LLOYD JONES

An online version of this reading group guide is available at littlebrown.com.

A CONVERSATION WITH STEPHEN LLOYD JONES

Where did the idea for The String Diaries come from?

I can't reveal too much about that without giving things away, but I can say that it began with a single scene: a young woman driving through the mountains at night. Her husband is bleeding to death beside her. Their nine-year-old daughter is sleeping on the backseat. Something terrible is following them. Something that has hunted their family for generations.

Were the historical sections difficult to write?

They were certainly enjoyable to write. More time-consuming than difficult, really, because so many individual facts had to be checked: which hairstyles did the aristocracy wear in nineteenth-century Budapest? How many bridges would have spanned the Danube in 1873? What did the ballroom of Buda's Royal Palace look like? How would an art deco drawing room have been furnished in 1927? Which handguns were available? What did people drink? What did they eat?

For guidance on Hungarian language and philology, I enlisted the help of a fantastic language tutor at the University of Westminster. I even ended up taking a few lessons. I recommend you avoid attempting Hungarian grammar with a hangover.

How different is the finished novel from how you first envisioned it?

Very different, for two reasons. Between having the idea that led to the premise and writing the first sentence, I spent a long time wrestling with the plot, knowing that something was amiss but not exactly what. Finally, I realized that—unintentionally—I'd made most of the key protagonists male.

The strongest, most courageous, and most resilient of my

friends are all women (terrifying, some of them). They would never have forgiven me if I'd written limp female characters. When I switched tack, turned the whole thing on its head, and made Hannah Wilde's story the key focus, everything fell naturally into place.

The second way the novel is different is this: since I finished writing it, a number of very talented people have read it and offered editorial advice. The result is a far better book than I could have written alone.

What are you reading at the moment?

The Passage, by Justin Cronin. I'm halfway through and hopelessly immersed. Luckily, it's the first of a planned trilogy, so I have about twenty-five hundred pages left to go. Two great books I read last year were *A Gathering Light* by Jennifer Donnelly and *The Age of Miracles* by Karen Thompson Walker.

What was your favorite book as a child?

Easy. *The Hobbit*. (Isn't everyone's favorite childhood book *The Hobbit*?) My dad read it to me most nights before I went to sleep. Close runners-up would be anything by Enid Blyton, Willard Price, and anything featuring the Hardy Boys.

Who's your favorite villain in fiction?

I'll take a couple. Robert Harris's Hannibal Lecter is right up there; I found the combination of brutality and sophistication utterly compelling. Uriah Heep, for sheer toe-curling awfulness. And finally Gollum. Because, well, he's Gollum. Monstrous, pitiful, comical, and delusional old Gollum. I enjoy villains that have a side to them—however small—that you can't help but like.

Which author's identity would you most like to steal?

For legal reasons, I'll choose departed writers. I like the idea of

wandering London's streets as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or Charles Dickens. I'd also enjoy strolling through Oxford as Tolkien or meeting up for a couple of pints with C. S. Lewis and talking about wardrobes.

Name a book you most wish you'd written.

Strangers, by Dean Koontz. It made a huge impression on me when I read it as a teenager, and it opened my eyes to a whole new genre. Also, Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*—one of the most powerful finales in literature, for me. Possibly an odd combination, those two together, but there you go.

What are your top five favorite films?

Impossible to choose only five! I'll assume that the Star Wars and Lord of the Rings trilogies are free takes. On top of that, *Braveheart*, *Apollo 13*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Contact*, *Signs*, *Gladiator*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Eternal Sunshine*, *Ghostbusters*. Sorry, that's nine. Or fifteen. And I recently saw *Another Earth* and loved it. Oh, and *Source Code*. And *The Adjustment Bureau*. And *Inception*.

If I was trying to sound intelligent, I'd add *Battleship Potemkin* and *Ladri di Bicicletta* [*The Bicycle Thief*], but more for the way they influenced cinema than for the visceral impact of their stories. That doesn't sound intelligent, does it? Just awful...

Any advice for aspiring authors?

It feels a bit presumptuous to give anyone advice after having only a single novel published, but seeing as you asked... The world around you isn't something you experience with just your eyes, but with all five senses. And, who knows, perhaps a sixth. That should translate into fiction. When you pull the trigger of a handgun, you don't just see the barrel kick. You feel it in your hands as it punches out the bullet. The air cracks. Your body

trembles. Your nostrils flare. You smell the tang of gunpowder. The blood has a taste and a smell—if there's enough of it, that is.

Second bit of advice: make sure the reader loves your characters. Then drag them through hell.

What I said about the blood, by the way—I've never actually shot anyone. Just to clarify.

What question do you wish we'd asked?

Which species of chameleon is the world's smallest?

Answer it.

You mean you don't know? It's the *Brookesia micra*, from Madagascar, and it's tiny enough to perch on the head of a match. I discovered that yesterday while researching the history of matches. It's the missing piece of knowledge in a lot of people's lives, I suspect. I'm certain they'd make intriguing pets.

By the way, modern friction matches were invented in the 1820s by the English chemist John Walker. Another equally life-changing fact for you.

And finally, what's next?

A sequel to *The String Diaries*, *Written in the Blood*.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do you think Jakab was born evil, or is his character twisted by circumstance?
2. How much of your own humanity would you sacrifice for the sake of your family?
3. Could you embark on a relationship with someone whose life span would be far greater or shorter than your own? Could you still be happy?
4. Is Professor Charles Meredith to blame for what happens to him? How might things have turned out differently?
5. How would you describe the *hosszú életék* and their culture?
6. How much of the *hosszú életék*'s history has been corrupted through folktales and storytelling?
7. Is Hannah a good mother to Leah?
8. If there's a central theme to the book, what do you consider it to be?
9. How do you think Hannah Wilde will cope with the loss of her sight?
10. What is the significance of the red deer stag?