



Oyster

By John Biguenet
ISBN: 9780060514471

Introduction to the Reading Group Guide

Set on the Louisiana coast in 1957, *Oyster* recounts the engrossing tale of a deadly rivalry between two families. To avoid ruin after years of declining oyster crops, Felix and Mathilde Petitjean offer their young daughter, Therese, in marriage to 52-year-old Horse Bruneau, who holds the papers on their boat and house. Bruneau has spent his life as Felix's rival for both the Petitjeans' century-old oyster beds and, as we learn, Mathilde.

These characters inhabit a harsh environment in which people save themselves, if they are to be saved at all. People work there without a margin, their boats mortgaged to the next harvest of shrimp or oysters, their work one of the most dangerous of daily occupations, their emotions scraped raw by the grievances they cultivate and pass down to their children as the only lasting inheritance of a life of poverty.

The spiraling violence of *Oyster* and the seething passions behind it drive an unpredictable tale of murder and revenge in which two women and the men who desire them play out a drama as elemental and inexorable as a Greek tragedy.

Questions for Discussion

1. The author depicts four generations of Follain women. Does each succeeding generation press for greater freedom, and is there a price to be paid each time?
2. Frequently in literature, things come in threes, such as three wishes or three chances. Do the three Bruneau brothers represent three different kinds of men?
3. There is strict racial segregation in Plaquemines Parish in 1957, but what are the other ways that world is segregated? Are the tasks and clothing and even language of men and women clearly differentiated? And are religions vigilant to keep out the influence of other faiths?
4. Set in the wetlands between sea and solid ground, *Oyster* has many elements that are in transition from one thing to another. What are some of the things in Egret Pass undergoing change?
5. How are the characters' lives shaped by the need to survive in a capitalist economy?
6. What is the role of religion in the world of these characters?
7. How are Mathilde and her daughter similar, and where does Therese differ from her mother?
8. Could one argue that the love story of Mathilde and Matthew Christovich is the real subject of the book?
9. In the end, does the reader wind up sympathizing with a murderer, hoping she will escape the law? If so, how does the novel achieve this surprising moral conclusion?
10. If you were to read the book a second time, do you think your feelings about Horse and Therese and the other characters might change?

About the Author:

John Biguenet, winner of an O. Henry Award for fiction, has published his stories in such journals as *Esquire*, *Granta*, *Playboy*, *Story*, and *Zoetrope*, as well as in various award anthologies. He is currently the Robert Hunter Distinguished Professor at Loyola University in New Orleans.