



Hell at the Breech

By Tom Franklin
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Introduction

In 1897, in the rural southwestern area of Alabama known as Mitcham Beat, an aspiring politician is mysteriously murdered. Seeking retribution, outraged locals -- mostly poor cotton farmers -- form a secret society, Hell-at-the-Breech, that begins with the intent to punish the people they believe are responsible but swells into a violent, primitive lust for power. The hooded members of this gang wage a bloody year-long campaign of terror that culminates in a massacre, where the innocent suffer alongside the guilty.

Caught in the maelstrom of the Mitcham War are four people: the county's aging sheriff; the widowed midwife who delivered nearly every member of Hell-at-the-Breech; a ruthless detective who wages his own private war; and a young store clerk harboring a terrible secret. Based on incidents that occurred a few miles from the author's childhood home, *Hell at the Breech* chronicles the dark events that lead the people involved to discover their capacity for good, for evil, or for both.

Discussion Questions

1. What role, if any, does race play in this story? Discuss the characters' attitudes toward African-Americans. Were there many differences in power between the white tenant farmers and the former slave farmers? The gang choose to wear white hoods, the traditional gear of the Ku Klux Klan. Why?
2. Should we allow the crimes of youth be used to judge adults? What if the crimes are classic symptoms of serial killers, such as the torture of small animals or setting fires -- should this information be kept secret? Do you think people who were underage offenders are more or less likely to commit crimes as adults?
3. Would you qualify the gang's murderers as serial killers? Why? If serial killers usually work alone, can they be a part of a gang? Which of the characters in *Hell at the Breech* might qualify as a serial killer? How are the gang wars of today the same or different as the one described here?
4. Was Mack guilty of murder in the sheriff's eyes? Was he responsible for any of the events that followed Arch Bedsole's death?
5. Did Mack have a choice about joining the gang? Does his passivity make him as guilty as the other members of the gang?
6. During the final showdown between the sheriff and the gang members, Mack ultimately sides with the gang members. Why? Can he redeem himself? How is Mack different from his brother William? How are they the same? What does the puppy drowning and the brothers' reactions to it reveal about them?
7. Several characters display a harshness that is unacceptable by today's standards -- for example, Floyd Norris's three ragamuffin sons who torture the dying Ardy Grant out of curiosity. Was this kind of detached cruelty necessary for survival? Are there examples of the opposite approach -- kindness and empathy leading to survival?
8. Sheriff Billy Waite sticks with his convictions and beliefs; this ultimately prevails. Yet, he reluctantly resorts to vigilante justice and admits that sometimes it is necessary. Do you agree that vigilantism is a necessity at times, even today?
9. Did you suspect the widow's role in the gang? Is it plausible that a man like Tooch would listen to an old midwife? Do you think women's roles in major events have often been like the widow's -- hidden but also integral?
10. In the end, the widow no longer loves Mack or William, though it was for them that she put these events in motion. Do mothers ever truly stop loving their children? Does the widow regret her actions?

About the Author

Tom Franklin, from Dickinson, Alabama, is the author of the collection of stories titled *Poachers*, which was named as a Best First Book of Fiction by *Esquire* in 1999 and was also the winner of a 1999 Edgar Award for the title story. Recipient of a 2001 Guggenheim Fellowship, he has held the John and Renee Grisham Writer-in-Residency at Ole Miss and the Tennessee Williams Fellowship at Sewanee. He lives in Oxford, Mississippi, with his wife, poet Beth Ann Fennelly, and their young daughter, Claire.