



## Cloudsplitter

By Russell Banks  
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### Plot Summary

Owen Brown, an old man wracked with guilt and living alone in the California hills, answers a query from an historian who is writing about the life and times of Owen's famous abolitionist father, John Brown. In an effort to release the demons of his past so that he can die in peace, Owen casts back his memory to his youth, and the days of the Kansas Wars which led up to the raid on Harper's Ferry. As he begins describing his childhood in Ohio, in Western Pennsylvania, and in the mountain village of North Elba, NY, Owen reveals himself to be a deeply conflicted youth, one whose personality is totally overshadowed by the dominating presence of his father. A tanner of hides and an unsuccessful wholesaler of wool, John Brown is torn between his yearnings for material success and his deeply passionate desire to rid the United States of the scourge of slavery. Having taken an oath to God to dedicate his life and the lives of his children to ending slavery, he finds himself constantly thwarted by his ever-increasing debts due to a series of disastrous business ventures. As he drags his family from farmstead to farmstead in evasion of the debt collectors, he continues his vital work on the Underground Railroad, escorting escaped slaves into Canada. As his work brings him into contact with

great abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and other figures from that era, Brown finds his commitment to action over rhetoric growing ever more fervent. But it is his son Owen--slowly maturing from a quiet, nervous young man into a bloodthirsty warrior--who finally urges his father toward the path of violence. This is the story of a rural family's wrenching transformation from anti-slavery agitators into political terrorists, and finally, tragically into martyrs.

### Praise For *Cloudsplitter*

"Nobody who reads the first chapters of *Cloudsplitter* can doubt that Banks has found his big subject. It is surely his best novel, a furious, sprawling drama that commands attention like thunder heard from just over the horizon." --*Time*

". . . a masterwork not only of white American fiction but of another divided whole, American literature." --*The New Yorker*

"Massive, startlingly vivid, morally and intellectually challenging. . . . --*People*

"Extraordinary. . . . Far surpassing Toni Morrison's works on this subject, it is the most important novel about race published in America since William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*." --*Baltimore Sun*

### Topics for Discussion

1. How reliable a narrator is Owen Brown? What parts of his narrative do you find circumspect?
2. Owen states that he does not believe in God, that for him, his father was his God. Is this an apt analogy? If so, how would you characterize his faith in his God?
3. With regard to the Kansas Wars, Owen writes, "It was no longer clear to me: were we doing this for them, the Negroes; or were we simply using them as an excuse to commit vile crimes against one another? Was our true nature that of the man who sacrifices himself and others for his principles; or was it that of the criminal?" What do you think, and why?
4. Owen claims, in his account of his life, to settle once and for all the question of his father's sanity. Does he do so? Do you think his father is sane or insane? Is Owen sane? What sort of criteria would you use to differentiate moral conviction from insanity?
5. Owen writes of his father and the mountain, Tawanus: "I have come over the years to associate the two, as if each, mountain and man, were a portrait of the other and the two, reduced to their simplest outlines, were a single, runic inscription which I must, before I die, decipher, or I will not know the meaning of my own existence or its worth." What might he mean by this? Why is the novel entitled *Cloudsplitter*?
6. In his Author's Note, Russell Banks makes it clear that *Cloudsplitter* is a work of fiction, and not a version or interpretation of history. Nevertheless, the novel contains much historical information. What is the relationship between fiction and historical fact in *Cloudsplitter*? Is "historical fiction" a deceptive distortion of history, or does it add to our understanding of history? Of the present?

### About the Author:

Russell Banks was born and raised in New Hampshire. At age 27, he graduated from the University of North Carolina and began teaching Freshman Composition. His first novel, *Searching for Survivors*, was published at age 35 by Fiction Collective. After thirteen works of fiction, including such acclaimed novels as *Continental Drift*, *Rule of the Bone*, *Affliction*, and *The Sweet Hereafter* (the latter two of which have been made into films), Banks has now produced one of the most important bodies of work in contemporary literature: *Cloudsplitter*. Ten years ago, he and his wife, the poet Chase Twichell, bought a second home in Keene, NY, not far from John Brown's grave. This proximity to a landscape that was so much a part of John Brown's story partially led Banks to begin thinking about his legendary neighbor, and he realized Brown's story had all the themes "[he'd] been concerned with, some would say obsessed with, for 20 years--the relationships between parents and children, particularly fathers and sons, and the interconnections between politics and religion and race."