



## The Ballad of Trenchmouth Taggart

By Glenn Taylor  
ISBN: 9780061922978

### Introduction

Meet Trenchmouth Taggart, a man born and orphaned in 1903, a man nicknamed for his lifelong oral affliction. His boyhood is shaped by the Widow Dorsett, a strong mountain woman who teaches him to hunt and to survive the taunts of others. In the hills of southern West Virginia, a boy grows up fast. Trenchmouth sips moonshine, handles snakes, pleases women, and masters the rifle—a skill that lands him in the middle of the West Virginia coal wars. A teenaged union sniper, Trenchmouth is exiled to the back-woods of Appalachia's foothills, where he spends his years running from the past. But trouble will sniff a man down, and an outlaw will eventually run home. Here Trenchmouth Taggart's story, like the best ballads, etches its mark deep upon the memory.

### Questions for Discussion

1. The book begins with an epigraph from former West Virginia poet Laureate Louise McNeill: "I have gulled the pith from a sumac limb to play a tune that my blood remembers." What does this mean in terms of the writer's (or artist's) duty in telling stories? (Hint: "gulled" used to mean "hollowed out." "Pith" refers to the marrow of the limb.)
2. To what Biblical story does Early Taggart's infant ride on the Tug River owe its inspiration? Discuss similarities and differences.
3. The Widow Dorsett is quite complex as both a mother and a breadwinner. In reading of her child-rearing techniques, her ailment cures, and her means of making a living, were you judgmental, in awe, or admiring? Perhaps none of these describes your feelings toward her. Whatever the case, explain your reactions to the Widow Dorsett in this context.
4. In terms of parenthood, how do the other early adults figure in to the shaping of Trenchmouth and Clarissa? What do you make of the Widow's treatment of the stranger at the door, and what do you make of Trenchmouth's reaction when he later discovers that stranger's identity? What about Frank Dallara's role? Mittie Ann Taggart? Cleona Brook? Hob Tibbs?
5. What are the similarities and differences in the depictions of the Methodist Church and the Church of God with Signs Following? Was/is snake handling a protected religious freedom in most states? Should it be?
6. Trenchmouth begins his adult sexuality with an experience at a very young age. When considering such experiences along with the recent strides in early sex education, do you think young people were more sexually active in the early 20th Century or the early 21st Century? Have education and the sexual revolution resulted in healthier attitudes toward sex? What roles do geography and class play in your answer (rural vs. urban, privileged vs. poor)?
7. What about the question of race in the book? For instance, what do you make of the attitudes and attributes of Arly Scott (Jr. and Sr.)? How do these qualities align with the common alignment of West Virginia with the South? (Seeing the film *Matewan* will help on this issue, as John Sayles did a good job of not romanticizing race relations in Mingo County in 1920, while simultaneously presenting them as the important exception to the general racial rule at the time.)
8. Keeping in mind your response to question 7, what was your reaction to the effectiveness of community unity in the face of corporate (coal company) power in 1920? Is it inspiring? Is the violent component understandable? Is such unity possible in the corporate climate of contemporary North America?
9. Keeping in mind your response to question 8, consider the fallout from such community rebellion. In other words, who takes the fall for violence committed? Does your answer change your outlook on the question of race in the book? How have our justice system and our media outlets changed in terms of who they are quick to criminalize?
10. What do the beginning pages of Book Two tell us in terms of memory? In other words, when Chicky begins to ponder the "realness" of things from his past (see page 133), and then considers that they never happened, how can we interpret this in terms of time and distance? To put it more clearly, if you were to go live alone on a mountain for 25 years, would you go crazy? Would you be wiser? Would you gain an enlightened perspective on the futility of our contemporary existences and their reliance on owning material things?
11. What about the role of music in the book? Consider the words of Jerome Washington that begin book two: "The blues is our antidote, and Long Tongue, the Blues Merchant, is our doctor." Washington wrote those words in a story about men incarcerated at Attica, who, for a brief time when a blues musician played on stage for them, forgot where they were. When the man finished playing, the inmates again saw the tear gas cannisters recessed in the ceiling. Such a sight reminded them right quick of where they really were. Can music truly be more than a temporary escape from our troubles? How so?
12. John F. Kennedy's visit in the 1960 Presidential primary seems to re-open many earlier themes of how outsiders view and treat Appalachians. There seems to be, in the book, a double want. Appalachians want their extreme poverty to be noticed nationally, but they don't want to be subsequently displayed and analyzed as objects. How can such a paradox be reconciled? Who bears the most responsibility for the continued national caricature of Appalachians?

13. In Book Three, Ace finds himself in a modern, urban world. How does his return trip to Matewan (pages 240-241) touch upon what has happened to the landscape of West Virginia? Similarly, how does his dog Yellow's death (and its aftermath, pages 242-243) comment on our collective transition from a rural, agricultural existence to an urban, industrial one?

14. Upon re-reading the Prologue and Epilogue, ask yourself this question: was there ever a reporter from *Time* magazine, or was it merely Trenchmouth's dementia? How does answering this question cause you to reflect upon realism versus apparent magic in the book? In the tales we have told and continue to tell, what is fiction and what is historical fact? What is storytelling and what is myth-making? What songs best show us our collective pasts? Are they protest songs? Are they ballads? Can a book itself be all of these things? Can it be a love song for a place and a people?

#### **About the Author**

M. Glenn Taylor was born and raised in Huntington, West Virginia. This is his first novel. It was a Fall 2008 Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection, and it was also a finalist for the 2008 National Book Critics Circle Award. Taylor teaches English and fiction writing at Harper College in suburban Chicago, where he lives with his wife and two sons.