



The Marrowbone Marble Company

By Glenn Taylor
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Introduction

Loyal Ledford works the swing shift tending furnace at the Mann Glass factory in Huntington, West Virginia. He courts Rachel, the boss's daughter, a company nurse with spike straight posture and coal black hair. When Pearl Harbor is attacked, Ledford, like so many young men of his time, sets his life on a new course. Upon his return from service in the war and back at his old job, Ledford starts a family with Rachel, but he chafes under the authority at Mann Glass. He is a lost man, unconnected from the present and haunted by the past until he meets his cousins the Bonecutter brothers. Their land calls to Ledford, and it is there, with help from an unlikely bunch, that The Marrowbone Marble Company is slowly forged. Its grounds become a vanguard of the civil rights movement and the war on poverty, a home for those intent on change. Such a home inevitably invites trouble, and Ledford must fight for his family. Returning to the territory of the critically acclaimed *The Ballad of Trenchmouth Taggart*, Glenn Taylor recounts the transformative journey of a man and his community. Told in clean and powerful

prose, *The Marrowbone Marble Company* is a story of struggle and loss, righteousness and redemption.

Questions for Discussion

1. The book begins with an epigraph from Louise McNeill, former West Virginia poet laureate. How does it set the tone for the novel? What questions does it raise about our notions of property and ownership, past and present, the living and the dead?
2. Loyal Ledford enlists immediately after Pearl Harbor. Have our ideas about patriotism and sacrifice changed from then to now? How did the war change Loyal Ledford and those he served with? How did it affect those left behind? Compare Loyal's experiences to those of today's soldiers, in war and in civilian life. What place do soldiers have in our consciousness today? How often do we consider what civilian life must be like for them after combat?
3. Many soldiers returning from World War II went to work in factory jobs. How has "work" changed since then? Do we see work the same way that Loyal's generation did? What do we "make" or manufacture these days? Compare conditions in today's "information" revolution with those of the industrial revolution. Was one circumstance better than another? How so? What have we gained in the transition and what have we lost?
4. Work is one of the central tenets of the novel. Will jobs of the future be fairer to workers than those in the past? What are the differences between "shared governance" versus a CEO mentality? How do community-action groups like the one at Marrowbone inspire hope, or, conversely, how might they further cynicism among workers? How would you configure your ideal workplace? Do we, as a society, place too much emphasis on wealth and individual power? What about empathy and charity? What place did they hold in post World War II America? What about now?
5. Oppression is another theme explored in *The Marrowbone Marble Company*. What do you think is the best method of defense in the face of oppression: peaceful resistance or violent retaliation? Was Don Staples posthumous letter "right" in its wisdom and guidance for the future? Was Ledford "right" in his actions at the novel's end?
6. *Marrowbone* recreates the Selma to Montgomery march. How did the author's portrayal enhance your understanding of the event? Has it swayed your outlook on civil rights, racism, and the fight for equality? What role does racism play in our country today? Are we a "post-racial society" as many in the media have claimed?
7. Images of the violence attending the Selma march shocked television viewers in the 1960s. How have our responses to such images changed since then? Consider the sheer amount of violent video that young people view today. Do you think increased exposure to violence desensitizes us? Should such violence as the events in Selma be televised? What might our attitude be if they were not?
8. What role do visions and dreams play in the book? When does Ledford first think about fishing on a boat? Running through head-high weeds? Hands afire? What do such visions and dreams tell us about our connection to our kin, both living and dead, past and future?
9. What do you think of Orb? Consider how he came into the world and his odd ailments, both physical and psychological. How did his gifts set him apart and influence his view of the world? How did his life impact those around him, especially his mother and father? What effect did the events at the Veterans Memorial Fieldhouse in the summer of 1968 involving Orb have on those same people?
10. Did you like the novel's ending? What emotions did it evoke? What do you think will happen to the characters? Is Rachel broken or is she whole? Will Ledford isolate himself or continue to fight against injustice? What about the other characters? Willy, Harold, Mary, Chester, Stretch, Mack and Lizzie? Where would you take them if you were continuing their story? Did you have a favorite character? Explain.
11. If you have read the author's first book, *The Ballad of Trenchmouth Taggart*, did you find any connections with *Marrowbone*?

About the Author

Glenn Taylor was born and raised in Huntington, West Virginia. His first novel, *The Ballad of Trenchmouth Taggart*, was a finalist for the National Book Critics' Circle Award and was also a Fall 2008 Barnes & Noble Discover pick. He teaches English and fiction writing at Harper College in suburban Chicago, where he lives with his wife and two sons.