

Mississippi Blood

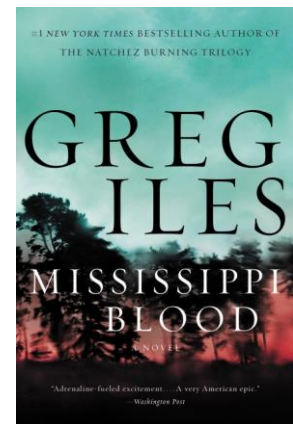
William Morrow

By Greg Iles

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Introduction

Shattered by grief and dreaming of vengeance, Penn Cage sees his family and his world collapsing around him. The woman he loves is gone, his principles have been irrevocably compromised, and his father, once a paragon of the community that Penn leads as mayor, is about to be tried for the murder of a former lover. Most terrifying of all, Dr. Cage seems bent on self-destruction. Despite Penn's experience as a prosecutor in major murder trials, his father has frozen him out of the trial preparations--preferring to risk dying in prison to revealing the truth of the crime to his son.



During forty years practicing medicine, Tom Cage made himself the most respected and beloved physician in Natchez, Mississippi. But this revered Southern figure has secrets known only to himself and a handful of others. Among them, Tom has a second son, the product of an 1960s affair with his devoted African American nurse, Viola Turner. It is Viola who has been murdered, and her bitter son--Penn's half-brother--who sets in motion the murder case against his father. The resulting investigation exhumes dangerous ghosts from Mississippi's violent past. In some way that Penn cannot fathom, Viola Turner was a nexus point between his father and the Double Eagles, a savage splinter cell of the KKK. More troubling still, the long-buried secrets shared by Dr. Cage and the former Klansmen may hold the key to the most devastating assassinations of the 1960s. The surviving Double Eagles will stop at nothing to keep their past crimes buried, and with the help of some of the most influential men in the state, they seek to ensure that Dr. Cage either takes the fall for them, or takes his secrets to an early grave.

Questions for Discussion

1. Greg Iles quotes from Robert Penn Warren's *ALL THE KING'S MEN* at the start of *MISSISSIPPI BLOOD*. This classic novel of the American South revolves around the career of Willie Stark, a back-country lawyer whose idealism is distorted over time by his lust for power. Compare the two works, particularly Warren's depiction of the driven Willie Stark with Iles's lead character, Penn Cage.
2. What parallels can you draw between the hate group, the Double Eagles, and other modern terrorist groups? What is the Double Eagles' ultimate purpose, and how and why does the Cage family come in conflict with them in the novel?

3. There have been many legendary courtroom scenes in Southern literature, Harper Lee's *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD* and the legal thrillers of John Grisham being two of the most memorable. How do the courtroom scenes in *MISSISSIPPI BLOOD* compare?
4. Penn confesses that the heroic character at the center of *TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD*, Atticus Finch, was the inspiration for his desire to become a lawyer. He also says that his father, Tom, was as close as you could come to Finch in the real world. What similarities do you see between Atticus Finch and Penn and Tom Cage?
5. Penn and his family initially question the tactics of Tom's defense attorney, Quentin Avery. To say that his legal style is unique would be a gross understatement. Discuss Avery's method of courtroom defense and whether or not you agree with it.
6. How might the story have been different if Tom allowed Penn to take a bigger role in his defense at the trial? Would the results for Tom have been any different?
7. *MISSISSIPPI BLOOD* and the entire *Natchez Burning* trilogy have been called "an American epic". What makes a novel or group of novels "epic," and what other books would you include in this group?
8. Any family saga is bound to be filled with guilt. Discuss how guilt plays a part in the lives of Penn and Tom Cage, and how this shapes their behavior in the novel.
9. A dark secret from Judge Elder's past is revealed during the trial. What effect does this have on the court case?
10. Of the many characters who testify during the trial, who do you believe had the most impact on the case and why? Who do you believe was the most honest and why?
11. As the final book in a trilogy, *MISSISSIPPI BLOOD* brings resolution to both storylines and characters. Like any good trilogy, the characters all have their turn to shine and are changed, for better or worse, in some way. Discuss the lead characters in the *Natchez Burning* trilogy, the journeys they take, and how each evolves through the course of the story.