

PIANO TIDE

Discussion Questions for Interviewers, Book Clubs, and Study Groups

1. Is fresh water something that can be bought and sold for profit? Do humans have a right to fresh water, a right that overrides the needs of fish and forests and future beings of all species? Or does fresh water belong to the future of the everlasting Earth?
2. Okay, let's cut to the chase. PIANO TIDE wrestles with one of the most contested issues of our time: Are the riches and resources of the Earth ours for the taking, valuable only as they are useful for human purposes? Or do the Earth and the Earth's beings have value in themselves, a value that calls for human restraint and respect? Does the book answer the question? Should it? How would you answer?
3. PIANO TIDE is an 'ensemble' novel, with a cast of characters of roughly equal importance to the plot. Kenny, Nora, Tick, Axel, Lillian, Davy, Annie Klawon, Howard, - - - all the way to "that jerk, Curtis." Which of these did you find most interesting? Whom did you most want to kick in the pants? Whom did you most want to embrace? Which character would you invite to dinner – or out to a picnic, in case you didn't want him to smell up your nice house?
4. This green, soggy, tide-swept place – the setting for *Piano Tide* – has such a strong role in the book, that it's almost like a character, with a persona and a role to play. But wait. Couldn't the same story have unfolded in, say, the Everglades, with alligators rather than bears? Or in Yellowstone, with wolves? Do you find something universal in this story, transcending its particular place? If so, what might that be?
5. A moral question, for the intrepid or reckless: Should Nora and her co-conspirators have created the flood that wrecked Axel's worksite? It was, to be honest, a thoroughly destructive and probably criminal act. When is that okay? When is it outrageous?
6. The story of Good River Harbor is told through the viewpoints of many different characters. That's not an unusual authorial choice. What *is* weird about PIANO TIDE is that there are sections told from the points of view of a sow bear, a river at the flood tide, and a drift net, unmoored. What do you think? – do those sections succeed? Why might the writer have gone to all the trouble of trying to see through non-human eyes?
7. John Gardner, author of *The Art of Fiction*, is said to have declared that "there are only two plots in all of literature: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town." Sure enough, as PIANO TIDE begins, a strange woman in a yellow raincoat arrives on the ferry. But is Gardner right? Surely you can imagine that perhaps no stranger ever does come to Good River Harbor. How does that story begin? Or maybe no one ever leaves; the boats just stay in the harbor, slowly sinking. How does that plot end? What is the pattern of the story of your life?
8. People do lots of morally questionable things in PIANO TIDE. Axel falls an ancient hemlock. Tick drowns a gull for crab bait. Kenny shoots a wounded bear cub. Nora burns a bridge. Axel fires Tick to punish Davy. Nora releases a flood. You will think of others; the plot-line is frankly a moral mess. But in all these cases, the people did what they thought was right. If you asked Axel, Tick, Nora, or Kenny what

makes an act right, what do you suppose each would say? What would you say? (Choose roles. Take sides.)

9. There is music humming along all through PIANO TIDE, from the title to the last sentence of the Coda. Can music convey what words are unable to express? If so, what roles does music play in this book? Nora claims that beauty in music is “as dependent on discord as on harmony, finding its energy in waves of tension and release, regret and grace.” Does it follow by analogy that there is no happiness without sorrow, no beauty without ugliness, no tranquility without excitement? If so, is that a comfort or a curse?

10. Let’s talk about making money. “Money does grow on trees,” Howard insists. And water? It falls from the goddamn sky. That’s what Good River Products is doing – transforming the unused resources of the Earth into wealth. So let’s ask Axel’s baffled question, What’s wrong with that?

11. Okay, so what do you think of all the swear words? The author of PIANO TIDE is a very nice lady who would never talk this way in public (except maybe when she’s talking about Big Oil). Is there any excuse for this kind of language?

12. And speaking of this nice lady. The seventh or eighth version of PIANO TIDE had lots more sex in it. There once was a sweet guy, Andrew. He and Nora made love on the tundra in a great squeaking of rubber overalls and squashing of blueberries. But for a variety of reasons, that scene and that sweet guy are gone. What is lost? Really, is something lost? Would you have given Nora a lover?

13. A funeral is a very good time to talk about coming home. And that’s what Nora does. “And when the salmon come, go home with them. Go home to the place where they die. That is the place where life begins again.” Do you agree that this our only immortality, when our chemical elements are sucked back into the cycles of life, the eggs of the ugly sculpin? And is this a good thing? Or is this the human tragedy, to disappear into other lives?

14. Tides. “There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature,” wrote Rachel Carson. And yes, we find comfort in the rhythms of growing and dying, coming and going. But, as the world warms, so many of the reliable patterns have been destroyed – the migrations are tweaked, out of sync, the patterns of melting and freezing, the early blooms, the berries, too early, the weirdness of the new weather and ocean currents. But the tides. The tides are controlled by an elemental force, gravity, that humans cannot alter. Is there comfort in the rhythm of the tides? Or are tides the final affront to the human ambition to control the world?

15. PIANO TIDE’s author is a professional philosopher. So you cannot blame her for sneaking in a little philosophy now and then. Do you think it’s true, what Kenny believes, that if you say the truth loudly, people will think you are insane? Is that because the truth points to a kind of insanity in the human condition, or because a person would have to be insane to tell the hard truth about the human condition?

16. The author did not know that Kenny was a prisoner of war, until Kenny told her. She did not know that Lillian was Axel’s mother, until Lillian dropped so many hints that no writer could have missed them. Nora remains a mystery to the writer, probably because that’s exactly what Nora wants to be. The writer tried to drown Davy, but Davy would not be drowned. And Kenny – oh, dear Kenny – the

author has fallen in love with him and yearns for him, dead before he could invite her into his dark cabin to talk, philosopher to philosopher. What is *this* about? Who is in charge of this book?

17. So let us end, as so many books do, with hope. As disgusted as Kenny is with futile hoping, it's possible that hope is the ultimate virtue, the ability to move forward, to try, even when the odds are awful. Are you a hopeful person? Is PIANO TIDE a hopeful book?

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