



# One Book Wyoming: *In Our Time* Discussion Guide

## HAPPY READING AND DISCUSSION!

You'll find included here questions to jumpstart discussion of Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*, this year's One Book Wyoming. Some questions address Hemingway's writing style, and some address the themes and concerns of particular stories in the collection. They are intended as starting points for discussion; our hope is that as you begin talking about these stories, your specific interests and observations about the stories will allow you to move beyond this starting point. The questions are roughly ordered by the order of stories in *In Our Time*, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't jump around to the questions that are most interesting to you.


## BACKGROUND ON *IN OUR TIME*


*In Our Time*, Hemingway's first collection of short stories, took several forms before its initial publication in 1925. Hemingway published many of the short "interchapters" first; the poet Ezra Pound commissioned six of them for a literary magazine in 1923. Hemingway then added twelve more and published *in our time* in 1924. For the 1925 publication, fourteen short stories were added to the collection and the title was capitalized. "On the Quai at Smyrna," the opening chapter, was written for the 1930 edition.


Because so many of the short stories involve the same characters and settings, *In Our Time* is considered a "short story cycle," which involves, according to scholar Margaret E. Wright-Cleveland, a collection "of interdependent narratives linked through repetition of character, setting, or theme." In other words, while you can read the short stories as self-contained, thinking about how the stories are in conversation with each other may provide a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Hemingway's work





# Discussion questions


 “On the Quai at Smyrna” (pg. 11) does not ease us as readers into the story. It presents a jarring start, both to the story and the book as a whole. What feelings or impressions did you have reading that first story? Notably, Hemingway added the story to the 1930 edition of the book; what is the effect of starting the collection with “On the Quai at Smyrna” rather than “Indian Camp”?

 During WWI, Hemingway volunteered for the American Red Cross as an ambulance driver in Italy. (Because of his poor eyesight, he was rejected by the US Army, Navy and Marines.) In June 1918, he was wounded by mortar fire and carried a wounded Italian soldier to safety, earning a Silver Medal of Valor from the Italian government. In *Men at War*, Hemingway described his experience in this way: “When you go to war as a boy you have a great illusion of immortality. Other people get killed; not you.... Then when you are badly wounded the first time you lose that illusion and you know it can happen to you.” Many of *In Our Time’s* “interchapters” focus on soldiers’ experience of war; what feelings/emotions do those interchapters seem to emphasize?

 Both “Indian Camp” (pg. 13) and “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” (pg. 21) provide portraits of Nick Adams’ father. What qualities does the first story emphasize about his father? What about the second? What are the results of Hemingway placing these stories in the order that he did?

 How do “Indian Camp” (pg. 13) and “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” (pg. 21) depict their Native subjects? What are their relationship(s) to the stories’ white subjects: Equal footing? Tense power dynamics? Something else?

 “The End of Something” (pg. 29) depicts the last moments of Nick and Marjorie’s relationship. In addition to their respective descriptions of that relationship, how does the story’s description of the breakup’s setting reflect what happens between the couple?

 Hemingway is famous for his minimalist writing style. He cited his time as a reporter as influencing his style, though certainly his time spent with other Modernist writers of the early twentieth century also had an effect. These writers were reacting to and against the often-flowery style of Victorian poetry. The poet Ezra Pound, for instance, advocated for a style of poetry labelled Imagism; he listed its main tenets in his essay “A Retrospect”:

1. Direct treatment of the “thing” whether subjective or objective.
2. To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.
3. As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.

Pound originally commissioned from Hemingway the vignettes that would become *In Our Time’s* “interchapters.” How do we see these interchapters reflect Pound and other Modernist’s emphasis on using “absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation?” Chapter IV (pg. 37), for instance, uses quite a lot of adjectives: “frightfully hot,” “simply priceless,” “absolutely perfect.” How would the feeling of the chapter change if those adjectives weren’t there?



# Discussion questions



Does “The Three-Day Blow” (pg. 37) affect/change the depiction of Nick and Marjorie’s relationship that we saw in “The End of Something”? What does Nick and Bill’s conversation indicate about what their idea of being a man is? Are their ideas, in your opinion, still reflected in today’s society? Why or why not?



Much like “Indian Camp” and “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” “The Battler” (pg. 51) depicts interracial interactions. What differences do you see between how Ad interacts with Nick and how Bugs interacts with Nick? How would you describe Ad and Bug’s relationship?



“Soldier’s Home” (pg. 67) is one of the only stories in this collection that explicitly addresses a soldier’s postwar experience. Krebs had been, as he describes, “a good soldier” (pg. 72), yet lies about his war experiences. Why does he do this? What are the effects of his lies? How are his familial relationships influenced by his time at war?



Scholars have noted how *In Our Time* reflects some of the broader concerns of Modernist writers of the early twentieth century. Scholar Margaret E. Wright-Cleveland identifies three in particular: “the relationship of the past to the present; the relationship between the individual and the land or nature; and the role of language in defining identity” (pg. 151 in *Hemingway and the Black Renaissance*, edited by Barry Edward Holcomb and Charles Scruggs). As you read and discuss the individual stories in this collection, consider how they might comment on these larger themes. Do “Soldier’s Home” (pg. 67) and “Big Two-Hearted River” (pg. 131), for instance, come to the same conclusion about the relationship between the past and the present?



Hemingway scholar Thomas Strychacz argues the three stories tracing Americans-not-in-America following “Soldier’s Home” show characters suffering “the rootlessness and meaninglessness of a life and culture without structuring codes” (pg. 76 in *The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway*, edited by Scott Donaldson). What are examples of the “structuring codes” Strychacz might be referring to? How do we know that the characters in “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot” (pg. 83) and “Cat in the Rain” (pg. 89) are missing them?



Much like “Mr. And Mrs. Elliot” and “Cat in the Rain,” “Out of Season” (pg. 95) features an American couple traveling abroad. Scholars have argued that although the story is told from the drunk Italian Peduzzi’s point of view, the story’s focus is very much about the couple’s relationship. What do their respective attitudes towards the fishing trip reveal about this couple’s relationship?



“Cross-Country Snow” (pg. 105), much like “The Three-Day Blow,” features two young men talking about their life and future plans. Has Nick’s point of view—about women, about his future—changed at all?



# Discussion questions



“My Old Man” (pg. 113) is both a story about a jockey and a portrait of a father-son relationship. What qualities seem to define Joe and his father’s relationship? As a boy, there are certain elements of his father’s job that escape Joe’s understanding. The story is also clearly told from an older Joe’s point of view. Do you think his opinion of his father has shifted over time?



Many of the “interchapters” in the second half of the book are about bullfighting (Chapter IX through Chapter XIV). What relationship(s) between humans and animals do these particular “interchapters” emphasize? Are there any parallels between how Hemingway describes these bullfights to the rodeos we have in Wyoming? Why or why not?



Another common element of Hemingway’s writing is what is termed the “iceberg theory.” The idea is that, just like only 10% of an iceberg is above the water, the literal words in Hemingway’s stories imply a depth of feeling, complexity, and symbolism “below the surface” of the story. In the posthumously published essay, “The Art of the Short Story,” Hemingway wrote:

A few things I have found to be true. If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. If you leave out or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless. The test of any story is how very good the stuff is that you, not your editors, omit. A story in this book called “Big Two-Hearted River” is about a boy coming home beat to the wide from a war. Beat to the wide was an earlier and possibly more severe form of beat, since those who had it were unable to comment on this condition and could not suffer that it be mentioned in their presence. So the war, all mention of the war, anything about the war, is omitted [from the story].

(Hemingway as quoted in Joseph M. Flora’s *Ernest Hemingway: A Study of the Short Fiction*, pg. 130-131).

If “Big Two-Hearted River” (pg. 131) is, at least in part, “about a boy coming home beat to the wide from a war,” but war isn’t mentioned at all, how does Hemingway indicate to his readers that this story is about war? Descriptions of the setting? What Nick is thinking about? What other stories in this collection jump out to you as good examples of this “iceberg theory”?



Hemingway was notorious for his love of hunting and fishing. In “Big Two-Hearted River” (pg. 131) what is Nick’s attitude toward fishing? Is that attitude consistent with how he interacts with the larger natural world? Do your own experiences with nature align with Nick’s? Why or why not?

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