

## A Reader's Guide



### An Unfinished Season

by Ward Just

- [About the Book](#)
- [About the Author](#)
- [A Conversation with Ward Just](#)
- [Questions for Discussion](#)
- [For Further Reading](#)

Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, winner of the Heartland Prize for Fiction, a New York Times Notable Book, and a Book Sense recommended title

### About the Book

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In *An Unfinished Season*, Ward Just brings us into the secret, shadow life that inhabits family, love, business, and politics in 1950s Chicago.

In the small town of Quarterday, on the far margin of Chicago's North Shore, nineteen-year-old Wilson Ravan watches as his father, who runs a printing business, fends off workers threatening to strike. A gruff and private man eager to maintain his power, Teddy Ravan vows not to budge, despite receiving threatening phone calls at home.

Meanwhile, Wils, planning to attend the University of Chicago in the fall, gets a summer job at a Chicago newspaper and suddenly finds himself straddling three worlds — that of the working-class reporters eager to expose local corruption, the glamorous debutante parties on the North Shore where he spends his nights, and the burgeoning cold war between his parents in Quarterday. Most important, he meets Aurora Brule, the daughter of a renowned psychiatrist with a disturbing past. Wils and Aurora fall in love, but their happiness is cut short by the unraveling of old secrets that make Wils question everything he once thought he knew.

### About the Author

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**Ward Just** is the author of fourteen acclaimed novels, among other works. His most recent book, *An Unfinished Season*, was a Pulitzer Prize finalist and winner of the Heartland Prize

for Fiction. His novel *Echo House* was selected as a National Book Award finalist. Just was awarded the James Fenimore Cooper Prize of the Society of American Historians for his novel *A Dangerous Friend*.

## [A Conversation with Ward Just](#)

### Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *An Unfinished Season* for every reader.

1. *An Unfinished Season* has been praised for its vivid evocation of Eisenhower-era Chicago; the city could be considered a character in the novel. How does Just capture both the essence of the city and the tension of the times? What details did you find particularly memorable?
2. In the novel's opening passage, the narrator recalls a popular news story: during Chicago's coldest winter on record, a woman who is thought to have succumbed to the elements is, startlingly, revived. Why do you suppose the story so captures the public imagination? Can you gauge a person's character by his or her reaction to it? What is the symbolic significance of the story?
3. In one sense, *An Unfinished Season* is a coming-of-age novel: it catches its narrator, Wilson Ravan, embarking on a season of self-discovery and maturation. Wils observes, "It did not seem to me that you could fashion a life until you could make the decisions that governed it." Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Is Wils ultimately able to forge his own life? Why or why not?
4. How does Wils's experience in the newsroom (the "fourth estate") change or reinforce his understanding of "business"? What does his time in the newsroom teach him about himself?
5. As Teddy Ravan faces union strikes at his printing shop, his relationship with his wife becomes increasingly fraught with argument. How does this business crisis bring the differences between Jo and Teddy to the foreground? How is Teddy's midwestern character different from Jo's northeastern one, in outlook or social mores or culture? Do you think their rift is inevitable?
6. From their first meeting, Wils is fascinated by the alluring Aurora Brule — and her family. What sets the Brules apart in Wils's mind? How do the social mores of the Brules differ from those of others in their social class, and how do they both conflict with Wils's own system of values? Does Wils lose contact with his moral touchstone?
7. Throughout the book, Ward Just explores the relationships between fathers and their children, the complex and subtle contrasts that develop from one generation to the next. Consider the differences between Teddy and Wils Ravan and between Jack and Aurora Brule. How do the family dynamics of the Ravans and the Brules complement or contrast with each other? Does Wils envy Aurora's relationship with her father? How does Wils's understanding of himself shift as a result of his contact with Dr. Brule? How do their mothers' absences

affect both Aurora and Wils?

**8.** How does Wils's experience, or lack of experience, with sex affect his understanding of Aurora's character? Of Consuela's?

**9.** Aurora tells Wils, "Secrets are what make the difference, one person to another. That's what personality is, secrets." How do secrets shape Wils's and Aurora's personalities, their romance, and the events of the novel?

**10.** How do "the arts" — including particular artists and works — help define the interests and natures of Just's characters? For instance, what does Wils's obsession with jazz tell you about him?

**11.** The novel offers a portrait of a time when government suspicion and corruption seeped into family life. How do events in the larger world affect individuals and families in the novel?

**12.** Jack Brule observes, "Family, friends, colleagues — that's our orbit. God help us when we slip from it." How does this statement resonate throughout the book?

**13.** In his *Los Angeles Times* review of *An Unfinished Season*, Neil Gordon writes, "In the pantheon of expert fictional observers of the Western political scene, Ward Just is both the most American and arguably the least recognized. Perhaps this is because his vision of the people who run the world on our behalf is, for all their conventionality, the most profoundly subtle and, in its insight, the most radical." How does Just's approach compare with that of other political novelists, for example John le Carré or Graham Greene or Alan Furst? How does *An Unfinished Season* both fit and diverge from the standard definition of a political novel? How do the events of Wils's turbulent summer parallel or reflect the momentous changes in postwar America?

## For Further Reading

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[Echo House](#) by [Ward Just](#)

[Jack Gance](#) by [Ward Just](#)

[The American Ambassador](#) by [Ward Just](#)

[Secret Father](#) by [James Carroll](#)