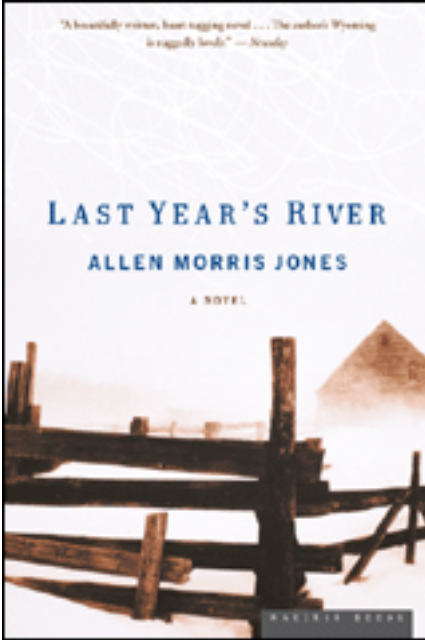


A Reader's Guide



Last Year's River

by Allen Morris Jones

- Questions for Discussion
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Questions for Discussion

- 1.** The book's title, *Last Year's River*, is an obvious reference to the physical landscape in which the story is set; that is, the North Fork of the Shoshone. But flowing water—when conspicuously used in fiction—often points toward larger meanings, toward metaphorical conceits. What other themes can be read into the novel, given its title?
- 2.** There is an established tradition in western letters of using landscape as an entrée into larger subjects. How does the landscape of Wyoming affect and comment on the story of Virginia and Henry? How does it affect the characters themselves?
- 3.** Weather plays an important role in the novel—Virginia and Henry make it a point to pay attention to drought, snowstorms, and the direction from which weather arrives. In what ways does the weather comment on the story?
- 4.** Virginia and Henry each describe several of the same scenes using varying and often conflicting descriptions. Given that these two characters spend much of the novel trying only to see the world through each other's eyes, to arrive at some understanding, how do these moments reflect on their relationship? Do you think it's ever possible to see ourselves as others see us?
- 5.** Henry is one of the most capable, courageous men Virginia has ever met, yet he's haunted by the perception of himself as an incompetent coward. Are there other characters in the novel who

see themselves differently from the way others see them? How do these skewed perceptions affect the story itself?

6. With the exception of the occasional comments made by the elderly Virginia, the author has chosen to omit quotation marks in his dialogue. Why did he use quotation marks for the older woman and not use them in the bulk of the narrative? How does this technique relate to Virginia's comment, prior to the epilogue, that in the end she can only imagine her own story?

7. One of the novel's epigraphs is from an Anna Swir poem: "Like an eye and an eyelid / United by a tear." Given the backgrounds of Virginia and Henry—the weight of each of their pasts—what can be inferred from the epigraph about the nature of their relationship?

8. The excerpt from Virginia's journals—the poem used to introduce the epilogue—is an important passage in the book and immediately precedes a scene in which Virginia is attempting to come to terms with her life. All her expectations haven't been met, but she's nevertheless working her way through tragedy toward contentment. How does the poem comment on Virginia's compromises? On her adjusted views of the world?

A Conversation with Allen Morris Jones

Q) Why did you begin writing *Last Year's River*?

A) Having lived in Montana since I was twelve, I have always been interested in the west as an idea, as something you can never really stretch your arms around. But it has always seemed to me (my family came from back east, from West Virginia) that the west can be understood only in the context of the east. The region has always existed—and indeed still exists—as a colony of the coasts. Financially, artistically, socially, if we westerners are not imitating, we are reacting against. So I wanted to write a book that explored this dynamic of east meets west. And I wanted to explore it through the eyes of younger characters, to see it fresh and new. Once I had decided to write about an eastern girl coming west—in itself something of a burden; how do you make a stale idea sound original?—then the rest of the story collected around it.

Q) *Last Year's River* is mostly set on a dude ranch outside Cody, Wyoming. What moved you to write about this particular place?

A) My hometown of Livingston, Montana, is very similar to Cody. They are both small, have tourist-driven economies, and are near Yellowstone Park. And they both wear their brief, colorful histories on their sleeves. The people are justifiably proud of who they are. But I didn't want to write about Livingston; I know it too well. In the process of telling my story, I didn't want to feel constrained by actual details of history and geography. My novel describes a bunch of imaginary buildings and people doing their thing on the banks of a real river. It's one thing to write fiction about a valley you have visited a few times for research; it's another thing to write fiction about

home. It would have been very tough for me to create a ranch and set it on the banks of the Yellowstone River.

Q) The first line of the book is "It's not an easy thing to tell a true story." Is this indeed a true story?

A) No. That line is spoken by one of the book's characters. It's a true story to her, to her character. That's as far as it goes. I should say, however, that I thought a great deal about rewriting this particular line. I didn't want to confuse the reader. But in the end, I couldn't bring myself to fiddle with it. It's been there since the beginning and helped set the tone for the rest of the book.

Q) So do you write with the reader in mind?

A) I write with individual readers in mind. Friends, family. How will certain people react to this scene, this character. But I also write for myself. Is this something that I would enjoy reading if I weren't the writer?—a question that inevitably sends much of my material into the trash can. If you count the false starts and dead ends and deleted scenes, *Last Year's River* could have been almost twice as long. But it was important to me that all the fat be trimmed. I wanted the reader to come away feeling as if he or she had just read an *essential* story.

Q) Was that your ambition? To write an essential story?

A) More than anything, I guess I wanted to write what every novelist wants to write: a book about genuine people who are going through some tough times. As readers, we want to believe in the characters, and then we want to see how they react when they're put in tight little tunnels with the water rising and the ceiling falling. Then we want to see them find their way out the other end. Not entirely intact, maybe, but changed for the better. And if not for the better, then at least changed.

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