

READING GROUP GUIDE

The Fallen Snow

by John J Kelley

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Novel Website: <http://www.thefallensnow.com>

Author Website: <http://www.johnjkelly.com>

One Sentence Summary

In a gripping tale of self-exploration and atonement, Kelley's debut skillfully evokes the unpredictability of life in 1918 through mesmerizing descriptions and fully realized characters.

Book Description

"Emotionally complex and brimming with grit" —*Publishers Weekly* (starred)

"From the heart, honestly and without frills ... timeless" —*Clarion Reviews*

In the fall of 1918 infantry sniper Joshua Hunter saves an ambushed patrol in the Bois le Prêtre forest of Lorraine . . . and then vanishes. Pulled from the rubble of an enemy bunker days later, he receives an award for valor and passage home to Hadley, a remote hamlet in Virginia's western highlands. Reeling from war and influenza, Hadley could surely use a hero. Family and friends embrace him; an engagement is announced; a job is offered.

Yet all is not what it seems. Joshua experiences panics and can't recall the incident that crippled him. He guards a secret too, one that grips tight like the icy air above his father's quarry. Over the course of a Virginia winter and an echoed season in war-torn France, *The Fallen Snow* reveals his wide-eyed journey to the front and his ragged path back. Along the way he finds companions - a youth mourning a lost brother, a nurse seeking a new life and Aiden, a bold sergeant escaping a vengeful father. While all of them touch Joshua, it is the strong yet nurturing Aiden who will awaken his heart, leaving him forever changed.

Set within a besieged Appalachian forest during a time of tragedy, *The Fallen Snow* charts an extraordinary coming of age, exploring how damaged souls learn to heal, and dare to grow.

Discussion Questions

1. *The Fallen Snow* is told in parallel timelines: the present of Joshua's return to Virginia, and a second of his wartime experiences in France. Why do you think the author chose to tell the story in this fashion? Did you find the format helpful or a hindrance to your enjoyment of the tale?

2. A subtle interplay of opposing seasons exists between the two timelines. Events in Virginia unfold from autumn to late winter / cusp of spring while scenes in France take place from spring to late summer / cusp of autumn. Were you aware of this juxtaposition while reading the tale? Did the seasons—or the dichotomy of seasons—color the mood of certain scenes or the overall story?

3. The natural setting plays an essential role in the novel, often used to emphasize character attributes and situations. What is the significance of placing the drama within a wilderness threatened by relentless logging? How do Joshua, Elisabeth and Katie respond to their surroundings, and what do their responses reveal about them?

4. Speaking of natural elements, what is the metaphor of the fallen snow, both as explained by Joshua's grandmother and as it emerges within the story? Does the nature of snow, ethereally and physically, contribute to themes of the tale? If so, in what way?

5. Of course, the novel extends beyond the rural Virginia setting, with a number of scenes in and near the western front as well as in wartime Paris. Did you find the war-zone scenes convincing? Was Paris, long associated with romance, a fitting setting for Aiden and Joshua to explore and ultimately consummate their relationship?

6. A number of symbols appear in *The Fallen Snow*. How do the following play a role and what do you feel each represents? Moon / Moonlight, the Saint Christopher medal, Music & Art, the Stone Cabin.

7. The human, flawed characters of *The Fallen Snow* at times bruise each other emotionally. What are examples of characters ignoring the feelings of others? How do intention and instinct play into their hurtful actions?

8. Joshua struggles with the role of instinct throughout the novel, from his feelings for Aiden and Katie to his actions as a sniper, even in his attempts to recover from his trauma. How does instinct help him? When do his instincts harm or lead him astray? In what ways do other characters act on instinct?

9. Though Joshua clearly suffers from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), known then as "shell-shock," he ignores the single, fleeting acknowledgment of his trauma in the opening pages. His reaction is unsurprising, as the condition was in that era considered a mental defect, a weakness. Have attitudes truly changed today? Would a modern-day Joshua face any less of a challenge?

10. Joshua also struggles with expectations before, during and after the war. What were some of those expectations? Were they realistically depicted? Does Joshua handle them maturely? Does he ultimately resolve them?

11. Elisabeth faces many challenges as well. Some are physical concerns, while others involve expressing herself and asserting her will. As the story unfolded, did you feel she was a victim of the actions of others, namely Wayne, or did she constrain herself? In what ways does she seek to find her voice? Does she succeed? On a related matter, do you feel her faith in Wayne was justified?

12. In response to both real and perceived expectations, the characters of *The Fallen Snow* sometimes repress their emotions. Can you cite examples? Could you relate to the characters' motivations and feelings?

13. Kelley has shared that one inspiration for writing *The Fallen Snow* is his fascination with the ways individuals learn life lessons from others, even when the individuals are not aware of the sharing. An example he cites is Claire's account of her mourning of David, which echoes and informs Joshua's experience after the war. What are other examples of a character sharing a life lesson with another character?

14. It has also been suggested the book explores the many ways people experience love. What relationships are explored in the novel (husband and wife, for example)? Did a particular relationship intrigue you? If so, why? Did you reflect upon your own relationships as a result?

15. How do you see Katie and Joshua's relationship? Does Joshua love Katie? What does Katie see in Joshua? Given the expectations of the era, they might well have married. From what you learn of them, how do you envision that relationship might have evolved? Could they have been happy together?

16. Regret and atonement are prominent themes of the novel. What regrets do the following characters carry, as expressed or suggested – Joshua, Wayne, Elisabeth, Aiden, Grandmother? Did particular regrets strike a chord with you? If so, which ones and why?

17. Did you have a favorite character? If so, who? Did a particular character capture your interest? What did you think of Harrison, the African American veteran, and his brief but revealing encounter with Joshua? How did each major and minor character evolve during the course of the novel?

18. Of all the characters, Claire is most cognizant of her longing for home. But she is not the only lost soul. In what ways do Joshua and other characters reveal their need for home, their quest for a place where they belong?

19. Kelley has said that, while it was clear from the start the novel was a coming-of-age tale, he found defining the genre a challenge. In your opinion, what genre best defines *The Fallen Snow*?

Critical Praise

“In a gripping tale of self-exploration and atonement, Kelley's debut skillfully evokes the unpredictability of life in 1918 through mesmerizing descriptions and fully realized characters. Joshua Hunter volunteers to fight in the Great War to escape his rural Virginia home, becoming a respected sniper in wartime France. Unfettered from his close-knit Appalachian community's expectations, he develops a growing quietness and strength despite the ugliness of war. Returning home a crippled war hero, Joshua feels the old familiar expectations becoming more onerous. And even an engagement and job offer cannot erase the past, the echoes of war, and a well-guarded secret. Kelley's novel is emotionally complex and brimming with grit. Told in a plainspoken manner through parallel story lines—the present in Appalachia and the past in France—this story will appeal to readers of coming-of-age stories with a historical bent.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred)

"Kelley's characters are believable ... human ... introspective, and when they speak it is from the heart, honestly and without frills. ”

—*Clarion Reviews* (5-stars)

“A timeless and timely novel of the physical and emotional cost of war.”

—*San Francisco Book Review* (5-stars)

“A universal story that delivers its message that love can never take root inside the head, but in the heart.”

—*Jill Wisoff, Unabridged*

“Neither a war novel nor a coming-of-age novel nor a romance novel - it is simply a novel worth reading.”

—*Lisa Jones, 300 Word Book Reviews*

~ *A ForeWord Reviews* 2012 Book-of-the-Year Award Winner ~

Author Biography

John J Kelley is a writer crafting tales about healing, growth and community. Born and raised in the Florida panhandle, he graduated from Virginia Tech and served as a military officer. After pursuing traditional careers for several years, he has devoted the last three to completing his first novel.

A member of The Writer's Center, John lives with his partner in Washington, DC, where he can often be found wandering Rock Creek Park when not hovering over his laptop at a nearby coffee shop.

John's debut novel recounts the struggle of a young WWI sniper returning to a Virginia community reeling from war, influenza and economic collapse. The novel received a *Publishers Weekly* starred review and was named a *ForeWord Reviews* Book-of-the-Year Award Winner.

Excerpt

1 – Joshua

He wasn't sure how long the woman had been watching him. But her stare was deep, and her hair ghostly white. That was all he could tell with his head lowered. He didn't dare meet her gaze.

When he had dozed, there'd been only a couple of passengers outside the Elkton depot. Now there were over a dozen, hovering near. They'd want to talk to him, like the folks in the Baltimore station and at the diner before it.

He pushed off the bench, rising as best he could. The wood platform ran the length of the building. Men were smoking at the end nearer the town. But the other side was empty, and dark. It would do.

The first steps were the hardest. The cold didn't help, though it was more than stiffness. More like his leg muscles had to relearn the motion, as though they'd forgotten their purpose. Maybe that was why he'd felt the compulsion from the time he'd awoken at the field hospital. He had to keep pushing lest he find himself trapped, or paralyzed. Or left for dead.

Movement came easier now. A man edged back, eyeing the scar along his scalp. The man's son, no more than ten, looked too. His gaze fell to the collar insignia and division patch, coming to rest on the ribbon. The younger ones always studied the uniform, seeing it more than him, which was just as well. But the boy said nothing, nor did the father. Another step and he was free of them.

Without his cane.

He glanced toward the bench. The cane was there, resting against his duffel. He wasn't going back now.

Continuing on, he scanned the predawn sky. The night was moonless, or at least he couldn't find it. There were stars though. At the end of the platform he could see them better. A soft glow bathed the farm across the tracks. The smell of cow manure was strong. Beside the station sat a lumberyard. He could smell the felled trees too, a warm woody scent destined to fade fast.

The nearest trunks were thick, four or five feet in diameter. Probably from the Blue Ridge, unless they'd cleared the whole length by now. Maybe some were from the western ridges, brought in on the Chesapeake & Western line. Logs from Hadley might be among them.

The thought stuck. It had never crossed his mind, though eighteen months was long enough. The loggers were efficient. A crew could clear an entire slope in a few months, and there were scores operating across Augusta County. Hadley wouldn't escape their reach forever.

Would Mom have mentioned it? The ridges were his element, not hers. She hated the mountains. Still, it would have been news. Surely she'd have made note.

He looked up when he heard the whistle. A freight train barreled along the far track, not slowing. The thunder rose to a feverish clamor. Just a train, that was all. No grenades or gunfire. No shells or gases. Yet his body made no distinction. He heard the ringing in his ear and felt the tightness in his chest.

He fled home, as he had each night on the front.

An orchard of hardwoods blanketed the land. By now prominent oak, chestnut and hickory would have cloaked the ridges in deep reds and muted yellows. Beneath their twisting canopy, he could wander for hours among hay-scented ferns, through sprinklings of mountain laurel, witch-hazel and dogwood. Stands of birch and spruce clung to high northern niches. Groves of hemlock shielded rocky streams below.

He remained there, safe along the wooded slopes, even after the train had passed. When he could breathe again, he opened his eyes. He wiped his neck, feeling the slender chain beneath his palm. His hand grew damp.

At his bedside in Toul, Claire had tried to explain the night sweats. "Your body is mending. You will be fine, *mon ami*," she had whispered, as if her words could make it so.

But he wasn't fine. He'd have to face them alone. And they'd want things from him. They'd want the old Joshua. It's what they'd expect.

The chill sank clear to the bone. Shaking it off, he turned. Passengers had begun to shift. The eastern sky was lighter. It wouldn't be long now. He should get his duffel and move nearer the tracks. Boarding would go easier that way.

He flexed his leg then made his way back up the platform. His gait was steadier now, but that was only half the battle. The rest was harder, much harder. So he dropped his shoulders, and he kept his head low.

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