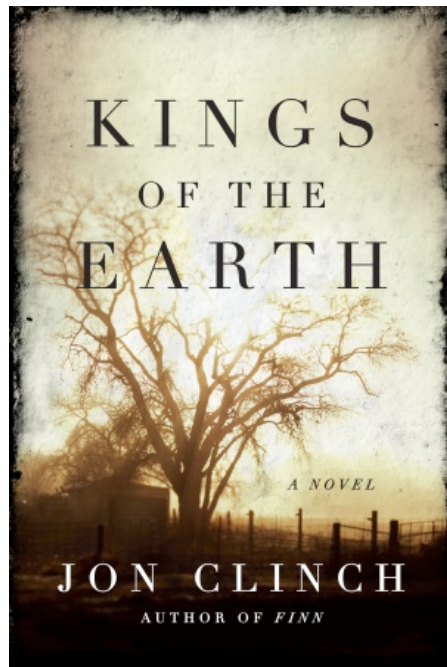


# *Kings of the Earth: A Novel*

**Jon Clinch**



## **A Guide for Reading Groups**

### **Part One: An Interview With the Author**

*Kings of the Earth* is Jon Clinch's second novel. His 2007 debut, *Finn*, was named among the top ten books of the year by the *Washington Post*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and the *Christian Science*

*Monitor*. It earned the Notable Book award from the American Library Association, and MetaCritic.com lists it among their 100 Best-Reviewed Novels of All Time.

Q: When you sat down to write *Kings of the Earth*, was there pressure associated with the reception that *Finn* had already received?

A: Oh, absolutely. Right after *Finn*, I spent a year and change writing a novel that I ended up throwing out entirely. It just didn't live up to the intentions I had for it. Plus—and here's the part that really matters, I think—it sounded and felt too much like *Finn*. I wanted to do something very different, and it took a lot of throat-clearing to find my way there.

Q: Where did the idea for *Kings of the Earth* come from?

A: For me, the key to writing a novel is always two-fold. First I have to find a character (or characters) whom I can care very deeply about. Then I have to find a method for approaching that character's story. A voice, to begin with, plus a storytelling system of some kind. I'm not particularly interested in conventional, linear narrative that goes straight from point A to point B.

In the case of *Kings*, the characters turned out to have been right there in my subconscious forever and ever. They're the people I grew up with, and the people my parents grew up with. At the center of the story is a family tragedy on a primitive farm in upstate New York, near the place where my dad was born. He didn't stay there, though, and the world where he and my mother raised me was so different as to exist in another universe. Or maybe a dream.

I wanted to explore that difference. The existence of two contrasting cultures side by side. The space where a deeply rural and primitive way of life intersects with a more modern world that needs it but barely recognizes it.

As a way of coming to terms with the main characters—and jumpstarting a respectful treatment of them—I even gave them my paternal grandmother's maiden name. They're

the Proctor brothers in *Kings of the Earth*, which makes them my forebears. It acknowledges their claim on me.

Q: That covers the characters. How about the storytelling method?

A: *Kings* has a kind of choral structure. I think of it as a single piece of music, sung in sequence by a large group of voices one after the other. I guess there are eight or ten first-person narrators altogether—each telling his own version of things—along with three very different omniscient narrators. The various voices aren't just useful for relating a wide range of events, they help reveal the various ways in which those events can be understood. Above all they provide a way to get deeply inside the consciousness and point of view of a whole community—a community that means a lot to me, because it's where I spent my youth and my young adulthood.

Q: With that many voices, how will the audiobook be? It sounds like a big challenge for whoever gets the job of reading it.

A: Actually, Recorded Books has produced *Kings of the Earth* with a big cast of actors—one for each first-person narrator, and another to handle all of the omniscient parts. It makes for an extraordinary listening experience. (I auditioned, by the way, and I got the part of Del Graham, the state trooper. He gets the last word in the book, which suits me fine.)

Q: When you were an aspiring novelist, what was the best writing advice you ever got?

A: The best? How about I start with the worst, just for contrast? It came from all kinds of people, it was certainly well intentioned, and it was very, very simple: "Don't screw around with Huckleberry Finn."

This could be generalized, of course, to "Don't take chances." And any time anyone tells you that, particularly regarding a creative enterprise, you need to run the other way as fast as you can.

As for the best writing advice I ever got, it was the oldest chestnut around: "Write what you know." Years and years back, as a beginning writer with big ideas, I rejected it as simplistic and limiting. Why on earth would I want to write about the boring life I led and the ordinary people I knew?

It turns out, though, that "write what you know" is not permission to put a thin veneer on your life story and pass it off as fiction. What it is, is an injunction to invest everything you've ever learned—concerning human nature, mainly, but concerning other things too, like music and fly fishing and superconductors and whatever else matters to you—into everything you write.

In *Finn*, it meant bringing one of literature's most repellent characters to life by treating him with the sympathy that we reserve for real human beings. And in *Kings of the Earth*, it meant setting up a panorama of different characters and points of view to tell a large and complex communal story that couldn't be told any other way.

So there it is. Write what you know. Meaning write what you care about and what you've learned to prize. And while you're at it, take a few big chances, too.

## **Part Two: Questions for Discussion**

1. One definition of what makes a novel says that a main character must go through some important learning process or transformation. Which characters learn or change the most in the course of *Kings of the Earth*? What causes those changes?
2. Of all of the Proctor siblings, only Donna is able to break free of the farm. Why do you suppose that is? What is it that makes some children able to lead lives that are very different from those of their siblings?
3. Lester, the Proctor family patriarch, is a hard man who doesn't show much in the way of affection. What effect did he have on the lives of his children?

4. Two of the omniscient narrators are tied to female characters—Ruth, the Proctor matriarch; and her only daughter, Donna. Why do you suppose the author chose to tell their stories this way? What affect did that have on your understanding of or relationship with Ruth and Donna?
5. The other omniscient narrator is tied to Donna’s son, Tom. How does his story intersect with and contrast with that of his mother? His father? His uncles?
6. *Kings of the Earth* is told out of chronological order. How would it have been different if it had been told conventionally?
7. A book with as many different points of view as *Kings of the Earth*—and as many different narrative threads and time frames—could be very demanding on the reader. Was it challenging for you? What did the author do to make the story and the various changes in point of view easy to follow?
8. The characters in *Kings of the Earth* range from extremely sympathetic to quite the opposite. Which characters did you feel the most sympathy and affection for? About which ones did you feel the opposite?
9. Thinking about your feelings for the characters: How did those feelings—like or dislike or whatever—affect your experience of reading their sections of the book?
10. *Kings of the Earth* contains a variety of tones and moods. Which appealed to you most? Which least? How did the combination of tones and moods affect your reading experience?
11. If you were to choose one character to tell the whole story, which would it be? How would the book be different?
12. *Kings of the Earth* contains many memorable observations and images. “There’s your war memorial.” “My brother Vernon went on ahead.” “He had his eyes shut tight and his arms out to both sides like wings, and he was flying. Flying on that tractor in the dark. All the way up the road from town.” Which images and phrases stayed with you in particular? Why?