





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



- 1: How would you describe Paul, the adult, in contrast to his younger self? What do they share in common, and how are they most different?
- 2: Why is young Paul's voice not consistently ageappropriate? What role does he play in advancing the story line?
- 3: Describe the relationship between Paul and his father, both during Paul's youth and into adulthood. Why does he call his father by his first name? What motivates Jake to be so demanding, and what do we learn about that over time?
- 4: Describe Paul's feelings toward his mother. What does the photo of her symbolize?
- 5: How does Paul feel about organized religion? Is he a spiritual person?
- 6: There are numerous passages describing the weather. How do those references interact with the storyline?

7: How does the oil and gas subplot propel the Landrum family, and how do they deal with those changing circumstances, collectively and individually?

8: In the future timeline, how has Jake changed, and what prompted those changes?

9: Describe Paul's relationships with his brother, his grandfather, and his friend, Teddy. What has he learned from each, and what lessons did he carry into adulthood?

10: How do the Landrum's handle their sudden transition from poverty to wealth, and how does that vary across each member of the family?

11: What do Paul, Amy, and Grandpa individually believe regarding the role of fate vs free will in determining the outcome of various events? In Grandpa's explanatory metaphor, what do the circles represent?

12: What does the title of the novel reference, and how does it connect to the lives of Paul and his family?

13: By the final chapter, how has the relationship between Jake and Paul evolved? What changes have they experienced in common, and what changes are unique to each character? Who has changed the most, and why?

## THE PROMISE OF UNBROKEN STRAW TRIVIA

- 1: What significant contribution did Native Americans of Oklahoma give to the war effort during WWII?
- a. An unbreakable code
- b. Highly trained horses
- c. Food for soldiers that could last for months
- 2: How many products are made using crude oil and petroleum?
- a. 500
- b. 1,000
- c. 6,000+
- 3: When oil was discovered accidentally, they were originally looking for what?
- a. Fossils
- b. Salt water
- c. Caves
- 4: Before oil was used commercially, how was it used?
- a. Farmers used it as fertilizer
- b. People would throw it away because they didn't know what to do with it.
- c. Native Americans used it as medicine.

- 5: How many Oklahomans lived on farms prior to the mid-1900s?
- a. Over half
- b. A couple hundred
- c. Almost all
- 6: Oklahoma is known for producing what crops?
- a. Winter wheat
- b. Corn
- c. Cotton
- d. All of the above

6: All of the above

5: Over half

4: Native Americans used it as medicine

3: Salt water

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1: An unbreakable code

Answer key:

## HISTORIC PHOTOS

Soldiers march through Oklahoma City in 1942 (20218.1994, Clayton E. Soule Collection, OHS)





Tenant farmer's house in eastern Oklahoma (8470.17, Grant Foreman Collection, OHS)

Drilling rig near Bartlesville, OK 1914 (23139.IO.O.F.B.1.8, Devon/Dunning Petroleum Industry Collection, OHS)



## AUTHOR Q&A

Q: Why did you write *The Promise of Unbroken Straw*? What inspired you?

Steele: In part, I was trying to commemorate a piece of land, the land where my ancestors had taken root. My father, and his father before him, lived on a wheat farm just prior to when this story takes place. I also wanted to involve my chosen profession within a storyline people could relate to

Q: The sense of place in *The Promise of Unbroken Straw* is well developed. Why did you choose to set the novel in rural Oklahoma?

Steele: I was born and raised in Oklahoma, albeit in the city (Tulsa) where the setting eventually shifts toward. My parents, on the other hand, were both raised in much more rural locations and I thought it would be interesting to imagine that sort of upbringing as a way to sort of posthumously reconnect with them.

Q: What is your favorite part of your novel and why?

Steele: I believe the most interesting aspect of Paul's story is that we get to observe him both in his youth and in adulthood. The narrative is constructed in a way that allows readers to see how those dots are connected. And those two timelines are tied off in ways that are ultimately

intertwined, with some emotional punches along the way.

Q: Your novel deals a lot with family relationships, or grief, guilt, and the effect money, or the lack thereof, has on people. What drew you to these themes?

Steele: I tried to construct this story with several specific conflicts as a means to propel the story forward and create situations that required resolution. So Paul's relationship with his father, Teddy's with his, the struggles of Paul's family to make ends meet, and how they would respond to the sudden exposure to extreme wealth were all areas that I felt would make for an interesting story. Then the ultimate gut punch that they were required to endure after a family tragedy amped this up to another level as we watched each of the characters try to cope with such a momentous loss.

Q: What was the most challenging part of writing this book?

A: Finding the time, Iol. But as to the process, probably researching the historical aspects of the story. I can't imagine what it must have been like to write before the internet. There were numerous details that required considerable time to chase down. And then early readers would sometimes point out mistakes in those details that required yet another round of research.

Q: What are some other books that have inspired your writing?

Steele: Names that come to mind include *The Catcher in the Rye* and *A River Runs Through It.* 

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Steele: One of the things I wanted to achieve with this novel was to give voice to people in pain. Through the experiences that *Straw*'s characters must navigate and their struggles in finding their way, I wanted readers to experience the hope that awaits on the other side.