

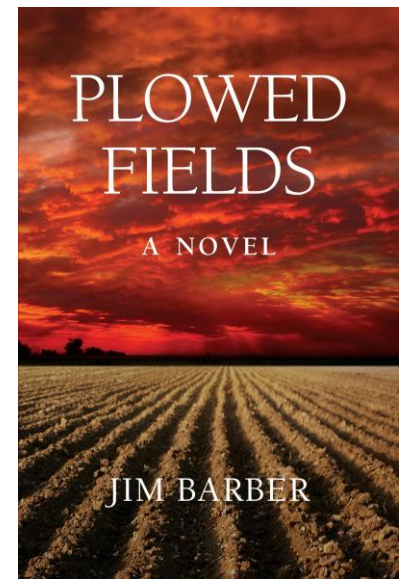
A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

PLOWED FIELDS by Jim Barber

Morgan Bay Books, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

It's December 1960, and a cold wind is blowing a rare white Christmas toward the Baker farm in South Georgia. For much of the decade to come, Joe Baker, an intense young man hell-bent on achievement and responsibility, will find himself torn between his own desire and ambition and his loyalty and responsibility to his family. Joe can be counted on to make all the right moves, but what happens when his instincts fail him? *Plowed Fields* is a family saga, played out between the turbulent years of 1960 and 1970. It is the story of people coming together and falling apart, relying on God and losing faith, and pushing forward and fighting back in times of crisis.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Warning: Questions contain spoilers

1. In the book's opening, a young Joe is clearly conflicted by his personal desires and ambitions versus his loyalty and responsibility to his family? After Matt tells his son to follow his own dreams, Joe concludes that life means "freeing yourself from one set of chains in order to be yoked to even tighter bonds." Do you agree or disagree with this viewpoint and why?
2. When we're introduced to Paul Berrien, one of the first things we learn about him is that he convinced the county coroner to cover up his father's suicide. Yet, despite his actions, voters are willing to forgive and forget and he gets elected sheriff. Even Bobby Taylor is dismayed by Paul's ability to succeed, wondering why his aristocratic opponent hasn't been jailed, much less remains a viable candidate. What does Paul's gilded fortune suggest about the idea of privilege and how does that relate to the world we live in today?
3. The Bakers had several Christmas traditions, including a shopping trip and pork brains and breakfast food for their supper on Christmas Eve. What's one of your favorite Christmas traditions?
4. In the episode, "The Train," Joe notes there's a big difference between "want" and "need," and he wonders whether the Cookville community and family farm provide his father and grandfather "everything they want." How would Sam and Matt answer that question? Do your current circumstances provide everything you want in life?
5. In an English class, Joe becomes known as "the defender of clichés," and argues that clichés deserve respect because they emerge from years of truth and satisfy a human need for familiarity and comfort. Do you agree or disagree and why?
6. Lucas Bartholomew traveled the country to find out if a black man stood a better chance in life in some place other than Cookville. Why do you think he ultimately returned to Cookville?

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS CONTINUED:

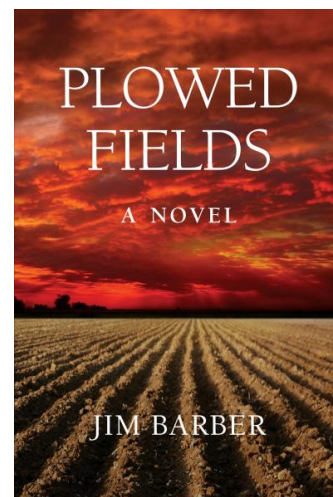
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7. Book Two begins with twelve-year-old Summer Baker complaining about having to do “women’s work.” Given that almost sixty years have passed since the setting of this scene, how do you identify today with her angst about her lot in life?
8. In the episode “Angels Sing,” Rachel wrestles with self-doubt and self-worth as she recovers from her illness. At one point, Rachel feels as if she’s spent her entire life preparing a feast, yet forgotten to set a place for herself at the banquet table. Do her struggles remind you of anyone you know? Do you think her feelings are common in older people?
9. Faith plays an important role in *Plowed Fields*, sometimes in very obvious ways such as Matt’s struggle to come to terms with it and Caroline and Rachel’s steady reliance on it. What faith moment stuck most with you in this story? Did the story ever cause you to consider your own faith in light of what happened to the characters in the book?
10. The farming life played a pivotal role throughout this story. What impressions most intrigued you about farm life?
11. Every job, every profession, has its ups and downs, but farmers definitely face factors beyond their control in terms of weather and market prices among other things. Did the story make you feel sympathetic to the plight of farmers? How would, or do, you deal with forces beyond your control in the workplace? How do those forces affect you on a day-to-day basis?
12. In terms of language, *Plowed Fields* was true to the time of its setting. Given the day and age we live in, how did the liberal use of the N-word throughout the book make you feel? Could the author have found a better way to characterize the prejudice? Or was the actual approach—harsh as it is—the better choice?
13. Was Joe right or wrong to participate in the demonstration against the Vietnam War? Why?
14. When a young person dies as Tom did in the book, it’s natural to think about things they missed out on in life. Is that a legitimate reaction? Can you miss what you never had in the first place?
15. Was Joe justified in shooting Billy Taylor, or should he have gone to jail? Why?
16. Who do you hold ultimately responsible for the death of Billy Taylor?
17. When Joe finally leaves home for a new life in Atlanta, is he embracing his future or running from his past?
18. Given everything you know about Joe, why do you think he fell so hard and fast in the aftermath of Billy’s death? Did his breakdown surprise you? Was it to be expected?
19. Was Annemarie Morgan right or wrong to assume that Joe would fully recover from his breakdown? Would you have trusted him to fully recover?
20. As a novel in episodes, *Plowed Fields* builds story upon story. What was your favorite storyline in the book?
21. There’s a wholesome quality that comes out throughout *Plowed Fields*, but there are numerous dark moments as well. Which won out for you—the wholesome quality or the dark moments?
22. *Plowed Fields* features a lengthy list of characters. Which character most intrigued you and why?
23. The Bakers would have been considered a liberal family in their day and age. Fast forward to today: Would the family be Democrats or Republicans?

A CONVERSATION WITH JIM BARBER

Q. What inspired you to write *Plowed Fields*?

As a young reporter, I covered the resignation of a bedridden sheriff who had been paralyzed by a stroke a year earlier. This individual had a reputation for being extremely harsh to black citizens in the county. Prior to the resignation, I had covered demonstrations for and against the sheriff. As I was driving home on the day of his resignation, I was intrigued by the rage and helplessness felt by both sides—the sheriff’s supporters and his opponents. But it was the idea of people caught in the middle of something beyond their control that planted the seed for *Plowed Fields*.



Q. What research was required to write the book?

It was fairly extensive. Fortunately, I have always loved history, so I naturally knew about most of the historical events that made it into the book. I did some limited research on those aspects to confirm I had the correct dates and authentic details. The heavy research came to ensure I understood the time and setting of the story. The main character, Joe Baker, is fifteen years older than I, so he had a different frame of reference. And while I grew up on a farm in South Georgia, I had to make sure I had the details right. I read through countless issues of my hometown newspapers from the 1960 to 1970. I also relied on interviews with my daddy and my uncles to ensure I got the farming details right for the period, as my personal farm knowledge was limited to the 1970s.

Q. Obviously, *Plowed Fields* is a work of fiction, but what is real in the novel and what is based on your own experiences?

The historical references are real. That part of the South did elect a woman to Congress in the late 1950s and I personally knew of two people who died from rattlesnake bites in a snake-handling church. The Baker family’s farm and house were modeled almost exclusively after my paternal grandparents’ farm (my mama lives there now), although I did expand the size significantly and throw in landscape features that make the book’s farm more intriguing. Beyond that, it’s my imagination. No doubt, my life experiences are reflected in the book, but I think they’re reflected in the attitudes and values portrayed and not so much in the actual events in the story. I can count on one hand the actual events that occurred in my life and made it into the book. But with one exception, those life events simply provided a nugget that could be expanded and embellished into something much more interesting than the real event. The one exception involves something that happened to me and a friend when we were camping at his pond. I drew enormously on that real-life experience to write the camping scene. But even the scene is embellished. I want to assure my mama that my friend Jerry and I did not drink any beer that night when we camped out!

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CONVERSATION CONTINUED

Q. What do you want readers to take away from reading *Plowed Fields*?

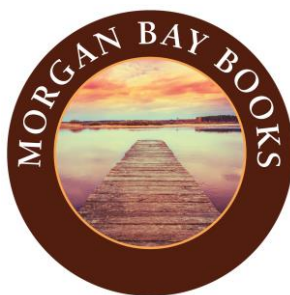
Beyond being entertained, I hope they come away with a true sense of the time and place where the book is set. It's a special time and place in my mind, and I wanted to preserve it in some way when I wrote *Plowed Fields*. I also hope the book challenges their faith as well. I believe the story is a journey of faith in many ways—sometimes in very blatant terms and sometimes just hovering in the background. I hope readers will consider their own faith in light of what happens to the characters in the book and end up in a very positive place.

Q. What do you like most about the book?

Oh, gosh, that may be the toughest question anyone has asked me. I like the detail and what I hope is the deep exploration of the characters. I think you get to know the people—even the minor characters—inside and out in many ways. Beyond that, I love the portrayal of a farming family's life, especially in that day and age. The story does a credible job of helping understand what it's like to own and work on a farm, especially the joys and the hardships that come with it.

ABOUT JIM BARBER

Jim Barber grew up working on his uncles' farms in rural South Georgia while pursuing his dream to become a newspaper reporter. His first job came at age sixteen, covering sports for his county newspaper, *The Berrien Press*. Jim spent the bulk of his newspaper career with United Press International's Atlanta bureau before a short stint with the *New York Daily News* led him to transfer to the world of corporate journalism and a twenty-five-year career with Georgia Power and Southern Company, one of the nation's largest utilities. A state and national award winner for his writing in both phases of his career, Jim previously co-edited three published books. Jim and his wife live in Atlanta near Stone Mountain, which he climbs faithfully almost every day. They have three grown daughters, one son-in-law (soon to be two) and three grand dogs. *Plowed Fields* is his debut novel.



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