



Breathing Out the Ghost
By Kirk Curnutt

Author Statement

I've always loved novels. When I was a child I used to make my own by tracing paperback-sized pages on my mother's stationery and cutting them to size. I was especially fond of using pinking shears because of the zig-zag pattern they made on the margin's edge; I didn't realize until years later that "pinks" were meant for fabric, not paper—though I doubt it would have stopped me. Paper is just another type of fabric, after all.

Once I cut the pages I filled up each side by typing on an electric 1970 Smith-Corona. (The typewriter actually lasted long enough to make it through my junior year of college, when the *e* broke and I was forced to pencil every single one in until I could afford a computer). My childhood books were inevitably action-adventure stories. I was no good at love scenes because my experience in that area was very limited compared to things like headlocks, noogies, and wet willies. I always stopped writing when I hit page 100 because that seemed the right length for a good story. Then I either glued the pages or bound the pages with yarn. Once I tried to sew them on my mother's Singer and snapped a needle. My parents and their friends were always kind enough to let me read to them what I'd written. They were also kind enough to let me get to the end before they howled with laughter.

Years later when I felt I knew enough and was disciplined enough to write a real novel I had a few simple goals: I wanted to try my hand at several different voices and styles, and I wanted to capture in the setting the rural Indiana and Michigan I knew as a child. I also wanted to create characters who weren't heroes or villains but merely people caught in the thick of what they've been dealt in life—or, in some cases, what they had dealt themselves. *Breathing Out the Ghost* is my effort at telling a story in which the plot is really an excuse to explore the emotions motivating the characters. The most insightful review I've received thus far said, "The basic plot is sad, but this isn't a sad story." That's a nice confirmation of the message I hoped to convey, inasmuch as I had a message. I wanted the story to respect the brokenness of being human. What does that mean? I'm not really sure, other than I think literature is as good as music for sorrow work—it lets us understand, imaginatively, how out of great sadness people either do or don't find their sea legs.

Discussion Guide

1. Why, if St. Claire is so intent on finding A.J., does he become addicted to amphetamines? Does his reliance on speed affect his sense of purpose?
2. How do St. Claire's memories of his father shape his relationship to A.J.?
3. Why does St. Claire call himself the "Ahab of the interstates"?
4. Does St. Claire's realizing his rage is destructive alter the reader's opinion of him? Does having this knowledge justify his actions and choices, especially towards Neve?
5. Sis finds no relief in making the quilt with other members of her Parents of Murdered Children group, as do many of the other parents. Why does she resent being admired for how she's handled Patti's murder?
6. Why is Heim so committed to finding St. Claire and bringing him home? How does his need to resolve A.J.'s disappearance parallel St. Claire's?
7. In several passages, Sis reflects on the monotony of suffering, What does she mean? And how does that feeling affect her opinion of St. Claire and his search?
8. Sis, St. Claire, Pete, and the Birmage family all grieve differently. Are they judging one another? Is any one way right or wrong?
9. References to wind appear throughout the book, especially in the chapters "Idiot Wind" and "A Striving After Wind." What does this symbolism mean to the various characters?
10. Does having Dickie-Bird Johnson narrate the chapter "Tenderloin" shine a different light on St. Claire and Heim? Do we need to hear Dickie-Bird's perspective?
11. Sheriff Dub Ritterbush is a minor character, yet the sole focus of the chapter "Night's Coming." Why does his story appear between Dickie-Bird's narrative and Heim's effort to get back to Indiana after being abandoned by St. Claire? Which character does Dub most parallel? Why?
12. In what ways are Sis and St. Claire's mother similar?
13. Discuss the secret Sis learns on her visit to St. Claire's abandoned wife, Kimm. How does this knowledge affect her? The reader?
14. What role does Pete Pruitt, Sis's husband, play in the story? Does Sis fail to understand Pete's grieving as she feels he has failed to comprehend her sorrow?

15. Why is Grandma Brandywine's story told in the second half of the "Apropos of Wet Snow" chapter? How do her losses in life compare to those of St. Claire and Sis?
16. Why does St. Claire confront Chance Birmage's father, By-God Bob? What other characters in the novel does By-God resemble?
17. When Sis and Heim confront St. Claire with the selfishness of his suffering he responds with a long barrage of clichés drawn from poems and songs. What are the sources for these lines? What do they all have in common? And what is St. Claire doing when he recites them?
18. Why does Chance Birmage's story end the way it does? How do events in his disappearance parallel those in A.J.'s?
19. Why, even after the accident with the gun in "Bears of Blue River," is St. Claire unable to resolve his despair? Is he ever able to reconnect with his family?
20. Do you think Sis and Pete resolve their resentments? And what happens to Heim's marriage after so many lies to Stephanie?
21. What is the symbolism, if any, of the playground game "spidering" mentioned in the last chapter? Does this symbolism appear anywhere else in the story?
22. Why does the story end the way it does? Why is the final chapter necessary to the story?