

Blackwood

Michael Farris Smith

1. In *Blackwood*, we find the man and woman arriving in Red Bluff, days after abandoning a small boy in Tunica, Mississippi. This small boy is Jack Boucher and the abandonment is the opening scene in *The Fighter*. Smith has said this was not part of the original plan for the man and woman but that it came to him later, and elevated *Blackwood* where he wanted it to be. These connections between books put novels in conversation with one another. How does it feel as readers to get that fully explored idea that characters have lives before the story began and after the story has finished?

2. Michael Farris Smith's work has been said to provide unexpected moments of grace or beauty in hard circumstances. In *Blackwood*, the earlier parts of the novel seem peppered with almost religious moments of reverence, moments in which the characters are in communion with the land or some higher power. But as the novel progresses these moments seem to fall away or devolve into something else. How do you see the role of the spirit and the soul as *Blackwood* tumbles forward?

3. As a child in 1956, main character Colburn inadvertently witnessed – and unexpectedly participated in – his father's suicide. The weight of this, his greatest burden, soon begins to drag him into deeper gloom when he returns to his hometown of Red Bluff, twenty years later. Why did he really go back, in your opinion? He seems to believe that he will not find any answers, but yet he is there anyway. Is there something to be said of the lure of the unknown?

4. It feels as if the characters are being consumed or smothered by the evil or darkness that, at the outset, initially only hovered at the edges of the story. Normally, nature reclaiming something is a benign or at least benevolent force. And if not that, something that we are to admire or root for—the triumph of the natural world over the follies of humans. But here, this darkness is represented by the encroaching kudzu, and has subverted or inverted that trope. Is it possible to lay the blame on those vines for the trouble that consumes these people and this town?

5. The regression of both the man and Colburn seem to mirror the kudzu takeover. It's slow and methodical and has come over decades. What can we make of characters like this: they cannot simply be a vacuum of evil or evil in a vacuum. What larger questions or comments about the world around them do you see arising from both the physical and emotional erosion?

6. The women in *Blackwood* are instrumental—providing strength and balance in a disintegrating world. And several seem to be foils or mirror images of one another. Smith has stated that at the outset of every novel, he always wants things to work out for his characters, but he cannot get in the way of the story once it begins to tell itself. Did you expect a better outcome for the women of *Blackwood*?

7. Among the many story lines and characters whose lives are beyond “complicated” in this tale is the presence of characters known as the man, the woman, and the boy – who all live tragic lives. In the end, it is the boy with whom Colburn finds an eternal attachment. Why is this quasi-relationship so important to Colburn?

8. Could the story of *Blackwood*, and the stories of the town of Red Bluff, have taken place in other regions of America? Which characters seem most rooted to place, and who of among this cast has the potential to escape?

9. Why do you think the author chose to set the novel in the mid-1970s?

10. The novel tells tales of great darkness and pain, but several of joy, hope and solace: who are the moral barometers of the novel? Do any of them have the power or influence to help the damned?

