



A troubled veteran takes one last shot at happiness, following a young actress from rural Nebraska to Hollywood in hopes of confirming that she's his daughter. A story not so much about the power of love, but the opposing, destructive power of its absence, *Coldwater Canyon* circles back to Shep's motherless prairie youth, the chaos and uncertainty of his time in the Gulf, and back to his current orbit, a mystically rendered San Fernando Valley, which he wanders with his faithful terrier, Lionel.

## TEACHING GUIDE

# Coldwater Canyon

by Anne-Marie Kinney

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### Recommended Classes:

- Creative Writing
- Contemporary/American Literature
- Narrative Studies

### Keywords:

Fiction / Novel / California / San Fernando Valley / Midwest / Nebraska / Desert Storm / Gulf War Syndrome / Alcoholism / Trauma / Sleep Paralysis / Stalking / Obsession / Crime / Dream Narrative

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does the novel use place as a narrative anchor?
2. What role does denial play in the characters' actions? What realities do they ignore in order to bolster their worldviews, and what are the consequences?
3. How does the novel's structure evoke Shep's mental and physical deterioration?
4. What parallels can you draw between Shep's fixation on Lila and Hung's fixation on Eugene and the water store?

5. A repeated motif in the book is Shep realizing he's misplaced his watch. How does this reflect the book's treatment of time and Shep's perception of it?
6. What role do The Cowboy and The Wraith play in the book? What does their presence add to the scenes in which they appear?
7. What is the significance of the dog's transition from Shep's custody to Hung's in the final chapter? How does Lionel figure into the two characters' journeys?
8. How is music used in the book? What patterns can you discern in the songs Shep hears and remembers and the associations he has with them?
9. Discuss Shep's relations with and attitudes toward the women in his life. What does he look for in each one, and what blind spots does he harbor?
10. How do dreams operate in the novel? In what ways are the events in dreams as relevant as the events that occur in waking life?

**Possible Assignments:**

- Walk around your neighborhood and write down/record the things you notice: people, homes, businesses, animals, nature, cars, advertising. Write a narrative piece inspired by your observations.
- Find a passage in the book in which mood drives the narrative. Write a fragment or flash piece in which the mood is the story and vice versa.
- Choose a section of dialogue in which characters don't listen to and/or speak past each other. Write alternative lines for the characters and note how the alternative dialogue either clarifies or obscures their aims.