READING GUIDE



A reading guide for book clubs

The questions follow the book's road, from the Winterberg to the Cape. Each section opens with a line from the novel.

About the book

A boy on the Winterberg survives a leopard mauling and carries its signature down his body for the rest of his life. By the time the farm is ash, the scar has company, and the man who wears it has one eye left, and a country to cross.

Between those two mornings: a forge in the Winterberg, the trekbokke crossing the Karoo, the gold at De Kaap, the Kimberley diamond fields, a false name carried the length of the country, and a woman out of the Welsh Marches who reads a horse before she reads the man riding it.

It is a novel about land: who works it, who is buried in it, and who holds the pen that says whose it is. It is the first book of four that follow one family across South Africa from the 1820 Settlers into the twentieth century.

About the author

Grant A. Poulton grew up in George, in the Southern Cape, and descends from the 1820 Settlers and the Cape Dutch. *The Leopard's Bloody Veil*, a four-book series that follows one family across the South African frontier, grew from family histories handed down by word of mouth. He lives in Cape Town.

Before you begin

The novel opens at its own end: on the Winterberg in May 1902, with a one-eyed man on a ridge above a burned farm. The rest of Book One goes back to tell how he came to stand there. The questions below run in the order of the road. The last set is for after you have finished.

The footnotes and the glossary carry the words of the frontier: Dutch, the Taal, Xhosa, and the Khoi and San languages. Several questions ask about them.

The Winterberg

> *"The Winterberg holds everything it has ever held."*

1. The prologue begins, "The land does not ask. It waits. It takes. It keeps." What did those four short sentences prepare you for? Did your reading of them change by the end of the book?
2. You meet the man at the end of his road before you meet the boy. How did knowing where he ends up change the way you read his beginning?
3. A boy is marked by a leopard and carries the mark for life. What else in the Winterberg chapters marks him as deeply as the scar?
4. The book calls the scar "the land's signature on a boy who should have died". Where else does the land seem to sign, claim or keep the people on it?

The Karoo and Graaff-Reinet

> *"The springbok had passed in their millions and were gone."*

5. The trekbokke crossed the Karoo in numbers that took days to pass a single farm. Within a generation they were gone. How does the book make you feel that loss, and who or what does it hold responsible?
6. How do the people of the book read the land? Compare a farmer's way of reading it with a tracker's, and with a clerk's.

De Kaap

> *"De Kaap was greed with the skin off it."*

7. What does the gold rush do to the people who come to it? Is anyone in De Kaap untouched by it?
8. "The rest of it lay where the land had put it, for a day that might come." Why might a man leave gold in the ground? What does that choice tell you about him?

Kimberley

> *"The town when it showed itself did not sit on the plain. It fed on it."*

9. Kimberley is drawn as something that feeds. How does the book set the diamond fields against the open veld of the earlier chapters?
10. The novel asks "who holds the pen that says whose it is." Where in the story does a register, a ledger or a piece of paper decide more than a person does?
11. A false name is carried the length of the country. What does a name protect, and what does it cost to live under one that isn't your own?

The road to the Cape

> *"In the night the sound of the falls stood in the place a heartbeat should have stood."*

12. On the long road south, from the Ghaap to Augrabies, Meiringspoort, Oudtshoorn and Knysna, the land carries much of the feeling. Choose a passage where a place says what a character will not. What does it say?
13. "The Ghaap is a high country of white stone, and the white stone drinks." What does the book ask of the people and animals who cross country like this?
14. At Knysna the road turns into the old forest. What takes him there, and what does it tell you about him and the people he comes from?

Cape Town

> *"It sat above the flat sand country like something set down rather than grown."*

15. After the interior, how does the Cape feel? What belongs there, and what does not?
16. The women of the book arrive with lives of their own. Choose one. What does she want, and what stands between her and it?

After you've finished

17. The book shows more of what violence leaves behind than of the violence itself. Did that work for you? Which aftermath stayed with you longest?
18. The Boer, the English, the Xhosa and the San each had their own way with the unseen, and in the book those beliefs meet at a child born in the caul. How did the novel hold those beliefs side by side? Did you ever read it as fantasy, or did it stay historical?
19. The author writes that the invented parts are the people, and everything they walk through happened. Which real history in the book did you know before you read it? Which surprised you?
20. The footnotes let you hear the frontier as it was spoken. Did they help you or slow you down? What did the languages of the book add?
21. The author's family came out with the 1820 Settlers, and both his grandmothers were Cape Dutch. Does knowing that change how you read the book's English and Boer families?
22. The book grew from stories told by uncles, aunts and grandparents. What story from your own family would you want set down before it is lost?
23. Book One ends in 1888. Book Two, *War and the Wire*, runs to 1902. Where do you expect the story to go, and whom do you most want to follow?

Bring the author to your club

Grant A. Poulton visits South African book clubs: in person in the Western Cape, and by video call anywhere. Clubs can also order signed copies at a club rate.

Write to grant@grantapoulton.com with your club's name, the number of readers and your city, or send a WhatsApp to 082 411 4444.

Signed copies, the ebook and the map of the book's road: **grantapoulton.com/tlbv-book-one**

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