

FROM THE DEAD
By John Herrick

READING GROUP GUIDE

Discussion Questions

1. To which character did you most relate? Why?
2. Jesse experiences growth during the novel. When does his growth begin: before or after his suicide attempt? Does Caitlyn experience growth as well?
3. As an actor, Jesse attempts to hide behind masks of characters. Was there a time in your life when you found it easier to hide behind a mask than face reality?
4. The author uses characters and scenes to contrast with each other. For example, Caitlyn's approach to commitment contrasts with that of Jada. What other examples did you notice?
5. In Chapters 13 and 16, Jesse must choose between personal integrity and the potential fulfillment of a dream. Have you ever faced a deep inner conflict? How did you respond, and what did you learn from the experience?
6. The Barlow family experienced the loss of a mother/wife. In what ways has Eden assumed a matriarchal role?
7. How would you define Jesse's relationship with Jada versus his relationship with Caitlyn? How does each relationship fit into its respective era in Jesse's life, particularly in terms of his character's growth?
8. Which events in Part One foreshadow events in Parts Two and Three?
9. Caitlyn secretly chose to raise Drew alone. Given her circumstances, age and perceptions, do you think she made the right decision? Why?
10. In Chapter 43, we learn the details behind the death of Jesse's mother. How might her death have impacted Jesse's relationship with the female characters in the novel?
11. In Chapters 1, 13 and 43, Jesse feels distant from God. In Chapters 38 and 50, he senses God's presence. Have you experienced either or both of these? How did you respond?

12. How do religion, emotion and sex drive Jesse? How do these factors seem to drive Eden, Caitlyn and Jada, or do they?

A Conversation with the Author

How did you arrive at the idea for this novel?

Many ideas for a story come from what-if questions. One evening years ago, while driving home from work, I listened to the oldies station on the radio. When the Dusty Springfield song “Son of a Preacher Man” started, something in the song’s momentum caught my attention and, for the first time, I listened to the lyrics closely. As you may know, the song is about a stereotypical, straight-laced preacher’s son who falls in love with a girl from the wrong side of the tracks. After the song ended, a thought hit me: “What if the opposite were true? What if the *preacher’s son* had made a series of mistakes and had undergone a downward spiral?” When I arrived home, the ideas came to me in a fury and I started sketching out my initial thoughts for the book. Obviously, the story is not based on the song and is completely unrelated to the song, but it’s a great example of how a what-if question can spark ideas.

Why did you select Los Angeles as your backdrop for Part One?

I had two reasons, and the Hollywood scene seemed a perfect match on both counts.

First, Jesse pursued a dream. More often than not, when you hear of someone leaving town for that purpose, the destination is either Los Angeles or New York. Putting Jesse into films rather than theater provides an access point for his acquaintances in Part Two. This sets up a contrast: Jesse’s west-coast lifestyle as it appears to others, versus the lifestyle Jesse knows. And as a result, we get another secret Jesse hides within.

Second, Jesse escaped his hometown to figure out who he truly is. Until age eighteen, he lived in his father’s shadow and suffered constant comparisons between his father and him. By stepping into different character roles—even as an extra—Jesse tries on a variety of masks in an attempt to discover the best fit. These masks also represent Jesse’s status quo in Part One: He hides behind a false self-image and he guards secrets from his past.

What do you believe is the key to understanding *From The Dead*?

Several factors come into play. As I wrote the book, however, I kept coming back to the notion of contrast—who Jesse was, who Jesse is, and who Jesse becomes over the course of the novel. Contrasting events instigate change within Jesse; contrasting events and characteristics also illuminate his progress—or, in some cases, how far he has fallen. These tools provide a method for comparison and/or counterbalance so readers can draw their own conclusions as well.

As I crafted the novel, major examples of contrast stood out for me. These include Jesse's "masked" self in California versus his true self in Ohio; Jesse's relationships with Jada versus Caitlyn, and how those women perceive their respective relationship; Jesse's sexual encounters in Chapter 9 and Chapter 47, and even Chapter 16; the concept of confidence versus fear. Ultimately, for Jesse, the biggest contrast is spiritual despair versus spiritual salvation.

Did you find any aspects of this novel a particular challenge?

Oh, without a doubt. In fact, Part One proved a challenge in its entirety—both to plan *and* to write! Many of Jesse's experiences were so dark, and it took about as long to write Part One as it took to write the rest of the book.

In particular, Chapters 16 and 19 proved quite uncomfortable because they were foreign to me. I believe the chapters that feel the most uncomfortable to write end up being the most emotionally compelling for the reader. If a writer is willing to endure a sense of vulnerability as he or she writes, I'm convinced readers can detect it. It can launch a novel from mere words on a page to something three-dimensional.

What motivates you to select one project over another?

In general, three elements tug me toward a writing project, including a novel like *From The Dead*:

1. The story emerges internally rather than externally.
2. Commercial and target-audience appeal.
3. A potential to inspire or encourage the reader — my favorite element.

The third element is fascinating because, when you think about it, the same collection of words can trigger a vastly different response in each reader. It can serve as entertainment for one person. It might inspire another to reach for his or her dreams. And that same novel could provide encouragement to a person enduring pain or contemplating suicide. Impact potential is a privilege, and it's like fuel during the writing process.

How do you perceive the connection between reader and author?

I believe the written word forges a bond between readers and the author. When readers choose to buy a book, they've chosen to invest their valuable time in the story. If they decide to continue reading past the first chapter, a bond forms. At this point, *the author* determines the depth of the bond: In other words, the more I invest myself emotionally in the novel—the more vulnerable I allow myself to become as an author—the deeper the reader will connect with what they read. If readers feel you've been honest with them and they're satisfied with what they read, a degree of trust results. And hopefully, by the end of the book, readers trust the author enough to invest part of their lives reading the author's next novel.