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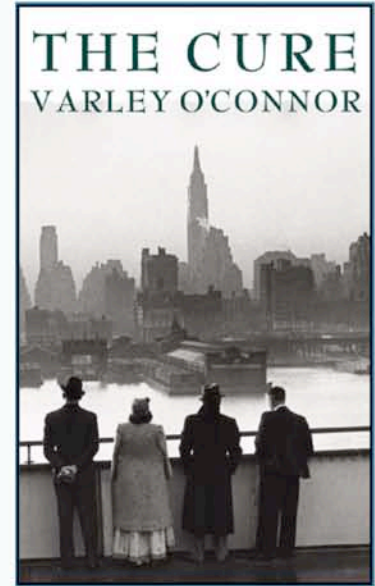
READING GROUP GUIDE

THE CURE

by Varley O'Connor



“This sublimely written novel takes on large issues such as illness, race, family relations, and the varieties of human love. Honesty and compassion inform every page, and there are passages so musical and full of grace they read like hymns. Reading groups should rejoice at this book.”
-Sigrid Nunez, author of *The Last of Her Kind*



251 pages

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading of Varley O'Connor's *The Cure*.

As America emerges from the Depression, the Hatherfords build a comfortable life just outside of New York City, in rural Bergen County, New Jersey. They are a glamorous couple: Vern is the charismatic owner of a successful Ford dealership, and his flamboyant wife Maeve is beautiful even in middle age. When their three-year-old son Scott falls prey to polio, and later, another son must go to war, their marriage slowly implodes. In the midst of it all, twelve-year-old Patsy steals swallows of whiskey and tries to make sense of the world around her, which includes an unusual intimacy between her brother Scott, and Julian, a young African American boy who lives among them.

Neither historical nor medical fiction, *The Cure* offers the pleasures of both in its richly complex portrayal of the lives and times of its characters. A beautifully written family saga about race, war, childhood illness, and romantic desire, *The Cure* has at its heart wounding and the struggle for hope.

QUESTIONS FOR
DISCUSSION

1. In the prologue we learn that Scott's "nerves" began from his third and fourth operations coming too close. Based on Scott's emotional state at the time, Mat advised postponing the fourth operation while Vern, on the advice of the orthopedist, insisted that it be performed. Some polio survivors who did not undergo surgery and other therapies claimed that they were better off. What evidence do we have that Vern's proactive response to Scott's disability was the wiser course? How emotionally damaged, or normal, does Scott seem as an adolescent? How important is it for Scott's self-esteem to "fit in"?

2. Identify ways in which Patsy's role in the family is shaped by illness, and shaped by the fact that she is a girl. How does her parents' relationship motivate Patsy's love for Mat? Why is she repelled by Reg Riley's crush on her at the end of the novel? (p. 243) Why does it make her feel "like a murderer, and also in danger of losing herself forever?"

3. Discuss the antipathy between Walter and Vi. How are the racial attitudes of the day expressed in their relationship? Why does Vi ask Walter to help her cook on the night of Howard's death?

4. Speculate on what might become of Julian as an adult beyond the world of the book. How might his experiences in the Hatherford household determine his life? Why does Julian refer to himself as a "double outsider"?

5. Was Vern wrong to do what he did after learning of Scott and Julian's sexual relationship? In Vern's defense, might he have thought he was, in a sense, protecting the boys?

6. When Abigail confronts Vern on the phone after Maeve leaves him, she claims that Maeve's "been through hell, starting with having me for a mother." How is Abigail a difficult mother? And do you see any similar patterns in Maeve's relationship with Patsy?

7. What do you think caused Howard's airplane to crash? Do you feel that he may have contributed to his own demise? If so, why? Cite evidence from the chapter when Howard comes home on leave, and in other places in the book, for your opinion.

8. Why does Vern rush away when Jack Raymond cries over Howard? Why does Vern strip Howard's room? Do you see his behavior as a typical response to grief? A typical male response? A response that connects to his experience in war? In business?

9. After Vern confronts Scott about his relationship with Julian, Scott pledges to work in the dealership. Is this a healing moment? A moment when Scott matures? Or is it a capitulation, the moment that Scott gives up his own dreams?

10. We get the details about Mat's first wife, Maggie, quite late in the novel. Why do you think Mat responded as he did to Maggie in the first place, and why is he guilty about the last actions he took with Maggie? How does Mat's capacity for empathy enlarge, and limit, his life?

11. Although WWII was a popular war in the United States, unlike the Vietnam War, the novel suggests that dissent existed: Julian mentions a friend confined to a CO camp, and Maeve questions a peace "built out of the bodies of children." How do you interpret Vern's gesture of surrendering the gun to Maeve at the end of the novel? What about Mat's tossing the gun into the ocean on the last page?

12. Why does Patsy betray her mother at the end of the book? Why, then, does she confess to Scott?

PRAISE FOR
THE CURE

"A sustained tenderness and rare emotional sympathy for all her characters infuse Varley O'Connor's latest novel, her best. *The Cure* is fresh and engaging from first page to last, not least because of the author's commanding literary skill, her imaginative control of the historic details, and her marvelous feeling for the fragility of family dynamics."

-Phillip Lopate, author of *Waterfront*

"In this poignant and well-told novel, Varley O'Connor inhabits the fragile lives that unravel in the face of illness and disease. But as with all wonderful writers, this is just the beginning for this tale ripples into one of race and class. Part period piece, part family saga, *The Cure* is a particularly American story and an achingly beautiful one at that."

-Mary Morris, author of *The River Queen*

"Varley O'Connor's *The Cure* is a moving, beautifully written, character-driven novel that captures the dangerous intersection between private life and the forces of history and gives the reader that rare pleasure of inhabiting another family life that feels at once entirely familiar and new."

-Susan Richards Shreve, author of *A Student of Living Things and Warm Springs*

Varley O'Connor is the author of *A Company of Three* (Algonquin, 2003) and *Like China* (Morrow, 1991). The *New York Times* called *Like China* "a first novel that soars," and Michael Chabon, author of *The Adventures of Kavalier and Klay*, wrote of *A Company of Three*: "An old-fashioned novel, in the best sense of that phrase, elegantly wrought, hard-headed, and tenderhearted about the world of theater and acting."

Most recently Varley taught writing at Hofstra University and Squaw Valley Community of Writers. In fall 2007 she will join the faculty of Kent State University.

Please visit her website at www.varleyoconnor.com.