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Books at the intersection of the arts and sciences

READING GROUP GUIDE

The Sojourn

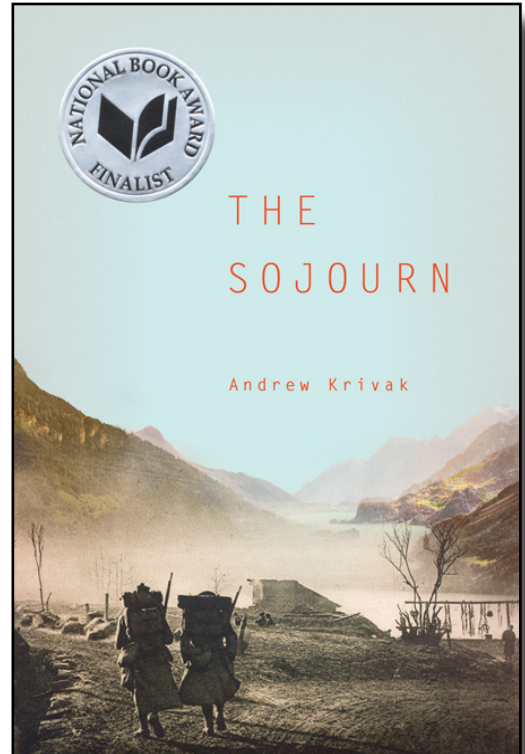
by
Andrew Krivak

"[*The Sojourn*] deserves to be placed on the same shelf as Remarque, Hemingway and Heller . . . Krivak has written an anti-war novel with all the heat of a just-fired artillery gun."

—*Barnes and Noble Review/Christian Science Monitor*

"Krivak takes us through the dark night of the soul and back into the light of hope. . . . Books that last are books that make meaning, that consciously or unconsciously change the way you view the next thing you read, the next idea you consider, the next response you have to the world. *The Sojourn* is that kind of book."

—DEB BAKER, Gibson's Bookstore (Concord, NH) at *bookconscious*



INTRODUCTION

Inspired by the author's own family history, The Sojourn is the story of Jozef Vinich, who was uprooted from a 19th century mining town in Colorado by a family tragedy and returns with his father to an impoverished shepherd's life in rural Austria-Hungary. When World War One comes, Jozef joins his adopted brother as a sharp-shooter in the Kaiser's army, surviving a perilous trek across the frozen Italian Alps and capture by a victorious enemy.

Set along a forgotten front, this novel is a stirring tale of brotherhood, coming-of-age, and survival that evokes a time when Czechs, Slovaks, Austrians, and Germans fought on the same side while divided by language, ethnicity, and social class in the most brutal war to date. It is also a poignant tale of fathers and sons, addressing the great immigration to America and the desire to live the American dream amidst the unfolding tragedy in Europe.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. The novel includes an epigraph from David Jones's World War One poem *In Parenthesis*: "It's difficult with the weight of the rifle. Leave it, under the oak." The rifle is a symbol of war in the poet's search for peace. But what role, or roles more specifically, does the rifle play in *The Sojourn*?
2. What are some of the "pieces" of America that Jozef's father clings to when he moves back to the old country? Does this "education" Jozef receives make him in any way an "American" character? Why or why not?
3. How and where is the opening tragedy of the novel played out again in the life of the young Jozef Vinich? To what end?
4. The *Sojourn* begins with the rather uncommon act of a man and his son emigrating from America back to their native land of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century. As a result, the main character (and the reader) is thrust into a strange culture and often untranslatable language. Does this create a sense of immersion or alienation?
5. Much of the middle section of *The Sojourn* takes place on ground covered—literally and figuratively—in the novels and memoirs of World War One literature, but a great deal of it is uniquely set on the forgotten southern front. In what other ways is *The Sojourn* similar to, or entirely different from, works by Americans such as Hemingway, or even Germans such as the novelist Remarque, who used the Great War to write about loss?

6. A “sojourn” is a time of rest in the midst of a journey, and yet this story is a classic *Bildungsroman*, or “coming of age” novel. How might the idea of “sojourn” be instrumental in the young Jozef Vinich’s coming of age? What is the role of fate in the novel?
7. How much belief does the main character have in his own free will? And how does the struggle between free will and determinism play itself out within the novel?
8. In a review of *The Sojourn*, Deb Baker pointed out the “small acts” that appear at moments throughout the novel, which have life-altering results. In many ways the entire structure of the novel moves according to this design. What are some moments you would identify as representing these “small acts?”
9. Late in the novel, the main character muses to an old man called “Banquo” on what, after the war, there is left to be afraid of. Banquo replies, “. . . one single moment in which we die so that someone else lives. That’s it, and it is fearful because it cannot be seen, planned, or even known. It is simply lived.” Do Banquo’s words ring true? For Jozef Vinich? For you?
10. The author has said in interviews that this novel is loosely based on the experience of his grandfather as a Slovak conscript in the Austro-Hungarian army, stories about whom were passed along to the author as a boy. He can’t possibly have experienced these events nearly a century removed, and yet he has chosen to use the first person point of view, and attempt an almost memoir-like story. Does he succeed? Is there a right way or a wrong way to tell family stories and what, in your own experience, explains the desire to tell or re-tell?
11. While Jozef’s biological family plays an important role in the novel, he encounters and accepts new people into his “family” . . . first his adopted cousin (brother in arms) and then a woman struggling for survival who he meets on his long walk home. What do you think his relationship with them says about the nature of family and the nature of love? What are our responsibilities to those we love?
12. Is this a novel—at its heart—about war or peace? Why?

MORE PRAISE FOR *THE SOJOURN*

“Intimate and keenly observed, [*The Sojourn*] is a war story, love story, and coming of age novel all rolled into one. I thought of Lermontov and Stendhal, Joseph Roth and Cormac McCarthy as I read. But make no mistake. Krivak’s voice and sense of drama are entirely his own.”

—SEBASTIAN SMEE of the *Boston Globe*

“A beautiful tale of persistence and dogged survival, set in the mountains, villages and battlefields of a Europe that exists only in memories and stories.” —*Los Angeles Times*

“A captivating, thoughtful narrative . . . and poignant reminder of how humanity was so greatly affected by what was once called the war to end all wars.” —*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“An engrossing narrative that goes beyond a war novel into a character study of loss and redemption.” —*Rain Taxi Review of Books*

“Deftly wrought, quietly told . . . Krivak studied all the Great War novels before writing, and the result is a debut novel at home amongst those classics. Highly recommended.”

—*Historical Novels Review* (Editor’s Choice)

“Unsentimental yet elegant . . . with ease, [*The Sojourn*] joins the ranks of other significant works of fiction portraying World War I — Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* or Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*.” —*Library Journal* (starred review)

“Charged with emotion and longing . . . this lean, resonant debut [is] an undeniably powerful accomplishment.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Rendered in spare, elegant prose, yet rich in authentic detail, *The Sojourn* . . . stands with the most memorable stories about World War I.” —*ForeWord Reviews*

“*The Sojourn* is a work of uncommon strength by a writer of rare and powerful elegance about a war, now lost to living memory, that echoes in headlines of international strife to this day.”

—MARY DORIA RUSSELL, author of *A Thread of Grace*

“*The Sojourn* is a fiercely wrought novel, populated by characters who lead harsh, even brutal lives, which Krivak renders with impressive restraint, devoid of embellishment or sentimentality. And yet — almost despite such a stoic prose style — his sentences accrue and swell and ultimately break over a reader like water: they are that supple and bracing and shining.”

—LEAH HAGER COHEN, author of *House Lights*

WHAT BOOKSELLERS ARE SAYING

“With *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway gave us a war novel in a uniquely bold, American cadence. In *The Sojourn*, Andrew Krivak gives us a war novel in the rhythms and harmonies of Bartók and Janáček. His use of language conveys the energy, wit, and grace of Mozart. With the centennial of World War One now only three years ahead, we do well to peer back into some of its shadowy corners, in this case central and eastern Europe, the Tyrolean Alps, and Sardinia.”

—**CAROL CHITTENDEN**, *Eight Cousins* (Falmouth, MA)

“A deceptively quiet novel filled with beautiful language . . . when customers talk with me about wanting a book that is finely crafted, whose writing is precise . . . I will unhesitatingly recommend it (like *Cold Mountain*, or *Tinkers*, or *Fugitive Pieces*, where the writing is also beautifully lyrical).”

—**EMILY CROWE**, *Odyssey Bookshop* (South Hadley, MA)

“Andrew Krivak’s precise and powerful novel contains an equal mix of tension, love, loss, and survival. *The Sojourn* crackles from start to finish with masterly finesse. I absolutely loved this book. It’s an important addition to World War One literature.”

—**MICHELE FILGATE**, *McNally Jackson* (New York, NY)

“As a sharpshooter in the declining Austro-Hungarian army, Jozef is entrenched in the tragedy of WWI in this exquisite first novel. Jozef had been a shepherd in the mountains before joining the army, and after the war, on his way home to his father, he encounters a mysterious gypsy girl in the forest. The two travel onward together, struggling to make it to their destination. In a novel full of violence and beauty, Krivak shares a unique story about a boy becoming a man during a tragic period in world history.” —**SHERRI GALLENLINE**, *Vroman’s Bookstore* (Pasadena, CA)

“This is a worthy first novel, a study of the horror of war set before, during, and after World War I. Krivak doesn’t scrimp at the horrors of war, and his prose is both immediate and distant. This is a book that has grown on me since I finished it. The author has succeeded in creating a haunting and evocative work.” —**MICHAEL COY**, *Ravenna Third Place Books* (Seattle, WA)

“A sharpshooter in World War I, Jozef has a deep and rich past, scattered with family tragedy. The story is beautiful and brutal.” —**JASON KENNEDY**, *Boswell Book Company* (Milwaukee, WI)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Krivak is the author of *A Long Retreat: In Search of a Religious Life*, a memoir about his eight years in the Jesuit Order, and editor of *The Letters of William Carlos Williams to Edgar Irving Williams, 1902-1912*. The grandson of Slovak immigrants, he grew up in Pennsylvania, has lived in London, and now lives with his wife and three children in Massachusetts where he teaches in the Honors Program at Boston College. *The Sojourn* is his first novel.

GO BEHIND THE SCENES

Find a fascinating conversation with the author, learn about the inspiration behind the novel, read an excerpt from the book, view family photos, and more: <http://andrewkrivak.com>