

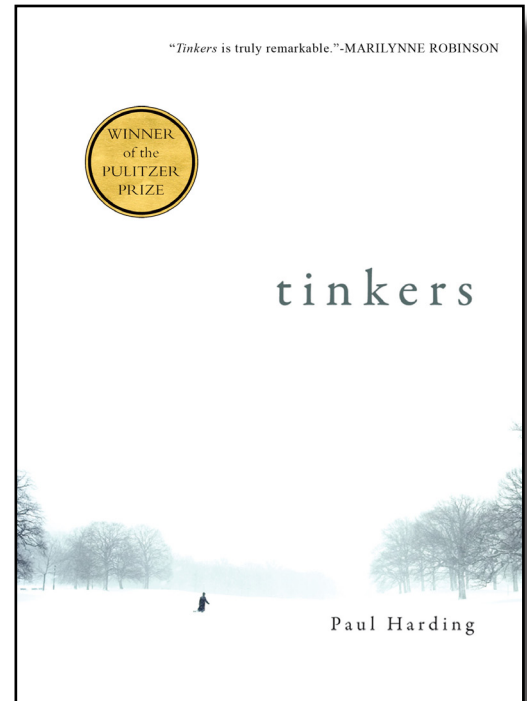
BELLEVUE LITERARY PRESS

Books at the intersection of the arts and sciences

READING GROUP GUIDE

Tinkers by Paul Harding

- *New York Times* Bestseller
- Pulitzer Prize Winner
- PEN / Robert W. Bingham Prize Winner
- International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award Longlist
- American Library Association Notable Book



INTRODUCTION

*An old man lies dying. Propped up on a hospital bed in his living room and surrounded by his children and grandchildren, George Washington Crosby drifts in and out of consciousness, back to the wonder and pain of his impoverished childhood in Maine. As time becomes fluid, his memories intertwine with those of his father Howard, an epileptic, itinerant peddler and his grandfather, a Methodist preacher beset by madness. At once heartbreaking and life affirming, *Tinkers* is an elegiac meditation on love, loss, illness, faith, and the fierce beauty of nature.*

The story behind this New York Times bestselling debut novel—the first independently published Pulitzer Prize winner since A Confederacy of Dunces received the award nearly 30 years ago—is as extraordinary as the elegant prose within it. Inspired by his family’s history, Paul Harding began writing Tinkers after his rock band broke up. After being accepted by Bellevue Literary Press, but before it was even published, the novel developed a following among booksellers and received glowing praise from critics. Readers fell in love and eventually the Pulitzer Prize committee took notice. A true word of mouth success story, Tinkers now graces bestseller lists across the country, proving once again that great literature has a thriving and passionate audience.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *Tinkers* is told over the course of eight days, as George lies dying—approximately the same amount of time it takes a hand-wound clock to run down. What do clocks symbolize in *Tinkers*, and why do you think their care and repair is so important to George?
2. After witnessing his father’s epileptic fit for the first time, George runs away, and his father, Howard, makes a fateful decision. Was it an accumulation of circumstance that led to his decision or do you think he made it in haste? Do you think George’s actions influenced his father? Or do you think Howard’s own father’s history was more influential?
3. George is very tolerant and forgiving of his mother’s bitterness toward his father’s illness. What do you think accounts for this? What other roles does illness play in the story? How does it draw the characters together or pull them apart?
4. How do the secrets the family keep from each other affect the way they interact? How do those secrets color their worldview?

5. During one of George's final revelations, he muses upon his father's life and thinks, ". . . but he was not like a clock or at least was only like a clock to me. But to himself? Who knows? And so it is not he who was like a clock but me." In what ways do different characters' perceptions of themselves reflect their perceptions of their loved ones?
6. The spirituality in this novel is subtle, but profound—what do you think the author is trying to say about forgiveness, grace, love, and free will?
7. The author, a former drummer, has said that his experience in a band helped him "keep the time" in this novel. Do you sense that rhythm within the story, and is it the kind of novel you'd expect from a rock musician?
8. The narrative is nonlinear—circling back upon the present day as George explores his own memories and as the histories of his father and grandfather are slowly revealed. By telling the story this way and by merely suggesting certain events and leaving other subjects open-ended, do you feel the author succeeds in inviting readers to open their own imaginations and fully participate in and experience the book?
9. How does the use of contrast work in the novel? For example, what happens when the rational, logical, and orderly passages about the workings of the universe (from the imaginary book, *The Reasonable Horologist*), are set alongside the individual characters' often disorderly, chaotic experiences of their personal lives? Do you think George is attracted to the rational version of the universe because his own experience has been so difficult for him to make sense of?
10. The role that kindness plays in the novel is very evocative. How do the passages about the hermit who returned Howard's kindness with his most precious belonging affect your understanding of both characters? What other acts of kindness are performed in the book?
11. This novel has been compared to the work of writers ranging from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Philip Roth, and from Annie Dillard to Marilynne Robinson. In what ways do you see this novel fitting into other stories of the American experience?

PRAISE FOR *TINKERS*

“There are few perfect debut American novels. Walter Percy’s *The Moviegoer* and Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* come to mind. So does Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*. To this list ought to be added Paul Harding’s devastating first book, *Tinkers*. . . . Harding has written a masterpiece.”

—**JOHN FREEMAN**, *National Public Radio*

“The life and death questions Paul Harding raises in *Tinkers*, as well as the richness of his writing, keep a reader coming back to it. . . . Like Faulkner, he never shies away from describing what seems impossible to put into words.” —**ANNE MORRIS**, *Dallas Morning News*

“*Tinkers* is a poignant exploration of where we may journey when the clock has barely a tick or two left and we really can’t go anywhere at all.” —**CHRIS BOHJALIAN**, *The Boston Globe*

“A novel with an old-fashioned meditative quality so perfectly done that it is refreshing to read in a world filled with noises and false excitements. . . . It brings the reader to a closer understanding of his own life than he could have imagined before taking the journey.” —**YIYUN LI**, *Granta*

“It’s a novel that you’ll want to savor. . . . I found reading it to be an incredibly moving experience. . . . This book begs to be read aloud.” —**NANCY PEARL**, *KUOW.org*

“Quiet, moving, breathtakingly crafted . . . [This is a book] we dare you to read, along with big writers like Jayne Anne Phillips and A.S. Byatt.” —**BARBARA HOFFERT**, *Library Journal*

“*Tinkers* is truly remarkable. . . . It confers on the reader the best privilege fiction can afford, the illusion of ghostly proximity to other human souls.” —**MARILYNNE ROBINSON**, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Gilead* and *Home*

“[*Tinkers* is] fascinating—and sometimes horrific—to read, and is cumulatively moving because it is woven together into the single quilt of our humanity.” —**BARRY UNSWORTH**, Booker Prize-winning author of *The Ruby in Her Navel*

“Paul Harding’s *Tinkers* is not just a novel—though it is a brilliant novel. It’s an instruction manual on how to look at nearly everything. Harding takes the back off to show you the miraculous ticking of the natural world, the world of clocks, generations of family, an epileptic brain, the human soul. . . . Read this book and marvel.” —**ELIZABETH McCracken**, author of *Niagara Falls All Over Again*

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Harding graduated from the University of Massachusetts and was a drummer for the band Cold Water Flat before earning his MFA from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. He has taught writing at Harvard and the University of Iowa and now lives in Massachusetts with his wife and two sons.

ONLINE RESOURCES FOR READING GROUPS

Listen to the Diane Rehm Readers' Review book club discussion and enjoy an excerpt from *Tinkers*:
<http://thedianerehmshow.org/shows/2012-06-27/readers-review-tinkers-paul-harding>

Find extensive supplementary material about *Tinkers* at *Book Drum*:
<http://www.bookdrum.com/books/tinkers/9781934137123/index.html>