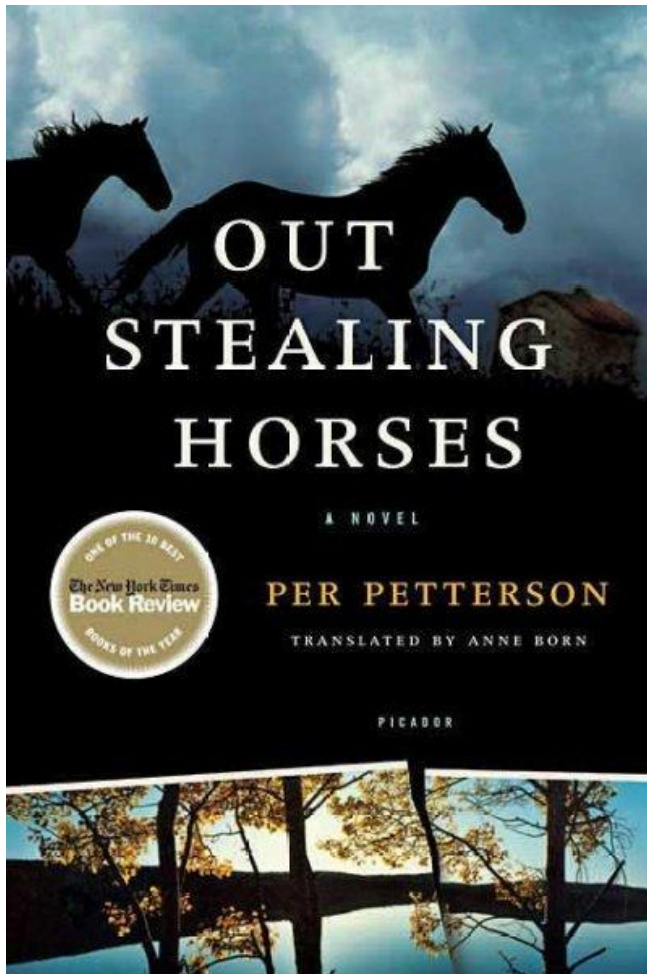


## Ann Arbor District Library: Book Club to Go Discussion Guide

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1328059>

### About the Book



Trond's friend Jon often appeared at his doorstep with an adventure in mind for the two of them. But this morning was different. What began as a joy ride on "borrowed" horses ends with Jon falling into a strange trance of grief. Trond soon learns what befell Jon earlier that day—an incident that marks the beginning of a series of vital losses for both boys.

Set in the easternmost region of Norway, *Out Stealing Horses* begins with an ending. Sixty-seven-year-old Trond has settled into a rustic cabin in an isolated area to live the rest of his life with a quiet deliberation. A meeting with his only neighbor, however, forces him to reflect on that fateful summer.

## About the Author *Source: NoveList*



Although Per Petterson (b. 1952) began writing at age eighteen, he did not complete his first book until he was thirty-five after a career as a librarian, bookseller, translator, and literary critic in his native Norway. He made his literary debut in 1987 with the critically acclaimed *Ash in His Mouth, Sand in His Shoe* (Aske I Munnen, Sand I Skoa), a collection of short stories. He followed with the novels *Echo-land* (Ekkoland, 1989), *It's Fine By Me* (Det er greit for meg, 1992), *To Siberia* (Til Sibir, 1996), and *In the Wake* (I kjølvannet, 2000), establishing him as one of Norway's most significant writers of fiction.

*To Siberia* was nominated for the Nordic Council's Literary Award as well as the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award. *In the Wake* received the prestigious Norwegian literary prize, Brageprisen, and was longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in the United Kingdom.

With his fifth novel, *Out Stealing Horses* (Ut og stjele hester, 2003), Petterson earned international recognition after first cementing a place on the Norwegian bestseller list for more than seventy weeks. Translated into more than thirty languages, the novel won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2006 and the coveted IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2007, besting such literary titans as J. M. Coetzee, Salman Rushdie, Cormac McCarthy, and Julian Barnes. In the United States, *Out Stealing Horses* garnered critical acclaim far and wide, including a listing as one of the best books of the year by *Time*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *New York Times*.

A voracious reader of classic world literature from an early age — from Tolstoy to Dickens to Norwegian writers — Petterson lists Ernest Hemingway, Paul Bowles, Grace Paley, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Richard Ford as influences, as well as Norwegian master Knut Hamsun.

Petterson most recently completed *The Moon Above the Gate* (Månen over Porten, 2004), a collection of essays. He lives on a farm in northeastern Norway, near the border with Sweden.

## Awards

*Out Stealing Horses* won the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2006 and the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award in 2007 (<http://www.impactdublinaward.ie/>).

## Reviews

### *Booklist Review* \*Starred Review\*

Three years after his wife's accidental death, Trond Sander, 67, settles into an isolated cabin near Norway's southeastern border with Sweden. It's where he last saw his father at the end of summer 1948. Then 15 and full grown, Trond helped harvest the timber--too early, perhaps, but necessarily, it came to seem later. He also suddenly lost his local best friend, Jon, when, after an early morning spent "stealing horses"--that is, taking an equine joyride--Jon inadvertently allowed a gun accident that killed one of his 10-year-old twin brothers and guiltily ran away to sea. When that summer was over, Trond went back to Oslo, but his father stayed with Jon's mother, his lover since they met in the Resistance during World War II. Segueing with aplomb between his present and past, Trond's own narration is literarily distinguished, arguably to a fault; would a businessman, even one who loves Dickens, write this well? The novel's incidents and lush but precise descriptions of forest and river, rain and snow, sunlight and night skies are on a par with those of Cather, Steinbeck, Berry, and Hemingway, and its emotional force and flavor are equivalent to what those authors can deliver, too.

### *Publishers Weekly*

Award-winning Norwegian novelist Petterson renders the meditations of Trond Sander, a man nearing 70, dwelling in self-imposed exile at the eastern edge of Norway in a primitive cabin. Trond's peaceful existence is interrupted by a meeting with his only neighbor, who seems familiar. The meeting pries loose a memory from a summer day in 1948 when Trond's friend Jon suggests they go out and steal horses. That distant summer is transformative for Trond as he reflects on the fragility of life while discovering secrets about his father's wartime activities. The past also looms in the present: Trond realizes that his neighbor, Lars, is Jon's younger brother, who "pulls aside the fifty years with a lightness that seems almost indecent." Trond becomes immersed in his memory, recalling that summer that shaped the course of his life while, in the present, Trond and Lars prepare for the winter, allowing Petterson to dabble in parallels both bold and subtle. Petterson coaxes out of Trond's reticent, deliberate narration a story as vast as the Norwegian tundra.

### *Library Journal* \*Starred Review\*

Sixty-seven-year-old Trond Sander lives alone with his dog in a remote cabin in easternmost Norway. He hopes this isolation will help him take life one step at a time after the deaths of both his sister and his wife three years ago. This peaceful solitude is broken by the appearance of his only neighbor out looking for his dog. Meeting Lars, a boyhood friend Trond hasn't seen in 50 years, brings forth a multitude of memories. In flashback, the story centers on the summer of 1948, three years after the German occupiers left. The defining moment in those memories was when Lars, at age ten, accidentally shot his twin brother with a hunting gun. Now Trond's daily routines mask other unresolved tensions from his boyhood: his passionate feelings for Lars's mother, his father's role in the resistance in 1944 and later abandonment of the family, and his own estrangement from his daughters. Petterson (*In the Wake*) has established his reputation abroad, winning several international prizes including the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, but he deserves critical acclaim here as well. Highly recommended for all fiction collections

### **Literary Criticism**

#### *The old man and the woods*

Recently Per Petterson was awarded the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award for his novel *Out Stealing Horses*; it is the world's largest literary prize for a single work of fiction published in English (including books translated from other languages). He has also been awarded the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and two of the major Norwegian literary prizes (the Norwegian Critics Prize for Literature and the Booksellers' Best Book of the Year Award), and his novel was chosen by the editors of The New York Times Book Review as one of the ten best books of the year.

*Out Stealing Horses* is Petterson's sixth book, confirming his stature among the most important writers in Norway today. His style is laconic, understated; like Hemingway, he's a master of dialogue, and what remains unsaid is of central importance. There is always more in his sentences than meets the eye. Above all, he's an intensely physical writer; *Out Stealing Horses* has that special quality that lets the reader smell the novel rather than just read it.

A theme that runs throughout Petterson's books is relationships between family members. In his highly acclaimed novel *To Siberia* (which was also nominated

for the IMPAC Award), Petterson takes on the perspective of a girl, but more typically, as in *Out Stealing Horses*, he focuses on the relationship between a son and his father. This is of course a well-known theme in literature, all the way back to Homer and Sophocles (not to mention Holy Scripture), and yet Petterson manages to make it fresh. Even when I read all his books in succession, as I have done, I don't feel that I am getting simply more of the same; rather I'm being led deeper into the heart of the matter.

Petterson differs from many of his peers in contemporary Norwegian literature, who have their roots in the radical Left of the 1970s. Unlike Dag Solstad, for example--probably the most famous living writer in Norway today--Petterson hasn't written on explicitly "political" themes. Instead, he has stuck to big questions as they are worked out in everyday life, especially in the family setting.

One other bit of background worth mentioning: Petterson's worked for years in a famous bookstore in Oslo (called Tronsmo). In that connection he came to know many of the most important writers of the day, but he was a late starter in his own literary career, due to a combination of high ambitions and low self-esteem. Writing didn't come easily for him.

His first book, published in 1987, was a collection of linked short stories set in Oslo in the 1950s, mainly focusing on the little boy Arvid Jansen and his relationship with his dad. Arvid, who is to some extent autobiographical, has become a recurring figure in Petterson's subsequent books. Two of these novels (prior to *Out Stealing Horses*) have been translated into English. The girl portrayed in *To Siberia* is Arvid's mother, who, like Petterson's own mother, is Danish. And *In the Wake* recounts Arvid's loss of his parents, even as he celebrates his debut as an author. This too draws on Petterson's experience: in 1990, three years after his first book was published, he lost his mother and father, one of his brothers, and a cousin in the tragic fire on the ferry Scandinavian Star.

*In the Wake*, which was published in Norway in 2000, includes a small section that Arvid (the fictional author) writes, describing it as a "possible future." The very same section is the opening of *Out Stealing Horses*, originally published three years later. What this suggests is that *Out Stealing Horses* is "written by" Arvid, Petterson's principal recurring character, as he reflects on the loss of his parents.

So what is *Out Stealing Horses* really about? Exactly that, the loss of a father. We'll come to that later.

When the novel starts, it's November 1999, and the 67-year-old Trond (the narrator) has just moved to a little house in a particularly quiet part of Norway. There's another man living in a cottage nearby, but Trond's only companion so far is his dog, Lyra. He usually gets up early to read yesterday's papers, listen to the BBC on the radio, and watch the birds come fluttering in to his bird table when it gets light: "All my life," he thinks, "I have longed to be in a place like this. Even when everything was going well, as it often did. I can say that much. That it often did. I have been lucky." The reader can be pretty sure that something not so good is soon to follow.

The narrative makes frequent jumps between Trond's present and past. The old man hasn't been bothered with thoughts about his youth for many years, but after an encounter with Lars Haug, the man in the neighboring cottage, the memories come flooding back. In 1948, the 15-year-old Trond spent the summer in a countryside cabin together with his father. There he became friends with a boy called Jon, who had two younger brothers, twins called Lars and Odd. Now, in 1999, Trond realizes that Lars Haug is the same Lars he met that summer--the boy who shot his twin in the heart, by accident, when he was ten years old.

From this memory, the story of Trond's past starts to unfold. The incident--a shot in the heart, from a twin brother--might strike some readers as a bit too melodramatic, especially given the coincidence of meeting Lars again just like that, after fifty years. Petterson anticipates this reaction, and disarms it with irony: Trond says, "Lars is Lars even though I saw him last when he was ten years old, and now he's past sixty, and if this had been something in a novel it would just have been irritating." (Indeed, in this novel and throughout his fiction, Petterson's black humor is not merely adequate, but steers the ship off the rocks in an elegant way.)

The accidental killing presents a stark contrast to the rest of the novel, which operates with small but effective scenes and imagery--for example, the scene in which Trond's friend Jon crushes a bird's nest with his bare hands. It's Trond and Jon who are "out stealing horses." The process is described early in the novel, where the two boys ride their neighbor's horses without permission--not "stealing," exactly, but serious mischief.

The primary function of the novel's title is to evoke the atmosphere that saturates the book. We're in the country, in the woods, as if we were going back in time. We're talking timber, and we're smelling it, too:

There was a scent of new-felled timber. It spread from the track-side to the river, it filled the air and drifted across the water and penetrated everything everywhere and made me numb and dizzy. I was in the thick of it all. I smelled of resin, my clothes smelled, and my hair smelled, and my skin smelled of resin when I lay in my bed at night. I went to sleep with it and woke up with it and it stayed with me all the day long. I was forest.

Trond is a Norwegian counterpart to the American cowboy, a lonesome and practical philosopher, or, quite simply, the old man in the woods.

I mentioned Petterson's affinities with Hemingway. Of course the novel also smells--in a positive way--of Knut Hamsun, particularly the novel *Pan*. But where Hamsun investigates the irrational corners of the mind, Petterson is more attuned to the rational ways of the body. As Trond puts it, when he and Lars are using their chainsaws on a big tree: "the movement first and then the comprehension."

So what does all of this have to do with reflections on a lost father? I won't give away too much of the plot, but something happened in the summer of 1948 that would dramatically change Trond's relationship with his dad. Indeed, relatively early in the novel, we learn that after their summer holiday together, Trond never saw his father again.

In 1999, only Trond's memories remain, especially the words his father once spoke to him: "You decide for yourself when it will hurt." This becomes a key phrase for the whole book. It reflects not only the physical pain of the sometimes hard work in the forest but also, and more important, Trond's pain as he looks back on the father who abandoned him. It hurts when a son leaves his father. But it hurts even more when a father leaves his son. "You decide for yourself when it will hurt" is a harsh bequest. And yet, this was perhaps the only survival strategy Trond's father knew, and he wanted to pass it on to his son.

It hurts reading *Out Stealing Horses*, but this is the kind of pain you shouldn't miss.

Source: Walgermo, Alf. "The old man and the woods." *Books & Culture* Mar.-Apr. 2008: 29. Literature Resource Center.  
<http://www.aadl.org/research/browse/books>

## Discussion Questions

1. "I needed to concentrate," Trond says at the start of the book (pg. 7), explaining his decision to move to the country. Do you think he is happy in his isolation? Is he making a brave choice by withdrawing to the country, as he has always dreamt of doing; or do you think he's fleeing the responsibilities of his life?
2. Soon after Odd is killed, Trond says "I felt it somewhere inside me; a small remnant, a bright yellow speck that perhaps would never leave me." What is it he feels? How does that day stealing horses with Jon, and learning what has happened to Odd, change Trond? Do you see the effects of that loss in him as an older man?
3. Petterson has been widely praised for his descriptions of nature, and of small quiet moments in everyday life. How does his writing make these ordinary moments compelling? Which images of landscapes or domestic scenes remained most vivid in your memory after finishing the book?
4. After his dream at the start of Chapter 5, which leaves him weeping, Trond says, "But then it is not death I fear." Do you believe him? If so, what is he afraid of?
5. How do you think Trond's life would have changed if he had hit the man in Karlstad (pp. 231-233)? Why does he attach so much significance to that decision?
6. Look at the scene in which Trond's car goes off the road and he sees the lynx in the woods (pg. 65). At the end of the scene, Trond says "I can't recall when I last felt so alive as when I got the car onto the road again and drove on." Why does a near accident, and the sight of the lynx, thrill him?
7. Were you surprised by Ellen's reaction to her father when she finds him at the end of the book? Would you be angrier in her position, or more forgiving? Has Trond been unfair to her?



8. How has Trond become like his father, and how has he managed to take a different path? What parallels do you see between the lives they lead in the book? How is Trond's behavior as an adult influenced by the short time he spent with his father as a young man?
9. Look at the book's final section, after Trond has discovered that his father isn't coming back. How does his behavior change? Were you surprised by his reaction to the news?
10. How do you think Trond's life will change after the end of the novel? Will he see more of his daughter? Will he and Lars become friends, or will he return to the isolation he had sought out when he moved to the country?
11. Look at Ellen's monologue about the opening lines of *David Copperfield* (pg. 197). How do you understand the phenomenon she's describing, of not being "the leading characters of our own lives"? Has this happened to anyone you know? Do you think it has happened to Trond? Is it a good or a bad thing?
12. Why do you think Trond's father doesn't tell him the story of the Resistance? Why does he leave it to Franz? How do you think Trond's perception of his father would have changed if his father had told the story himself?

## Multimedia

### ***Per Petterson: A Family Approach To Fiction* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=130070920>

A discussion of the author on NPR.

### ***'Out Stealing Horses' Beats Fiction Heavyweights* (Radio Broadcast)**

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=12011527>

NPR's report on acclaim for the novel.

### ***International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award winner Per Petterson* (Video Clip)**

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vtEETADX69A>

The author's acceptance speech for the prestigious award.

## Further Reading

***I Curse the River of Time*** by Per Petterson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1366413>

(Call number: Fiction Petterson)

Anticipating a divorce against a backdrop of the fall of communism, Arvid Jansen is further dismayed by his mother's diagnosis with cancer, a situation that prompts his emotionally charged quest for understanding and balance.

***In the Wake*** by Per Petterson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1272386>

(Call number: Fiction Petterson)

Per Petterson's masterful American debut novel tells the story of a writer whose life stands still after a terrible accident takes the lives of his parents and younger brothers. The grief and guilt he feels over having survived is too overwhelming, and work on his novel stalls as he moves through life in a cold haze. Arvid's only human contact is with his Kurdish neighbor and with a woman whom he glimpses in a flat across the road. Then, slowly, the memories begin to return. He begins to write again.

***To Siberia*** by Per Petterson

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1316870>

(Call number: Fiction Petterson)

In the years before the Nazis arrive, two young people growing up in Danish Jutland have dreams of leaving their frigid coastal town while coping with distant parents, eccentric family members, and the cold winds. In the aftermath of their grandfather's suicide, the arrival of puberty and most tragically, the German invasion, their idyllic childhood changes forever.

***Author's official website***

<http://perpetterson.com/>

Information, resources, and news from the author.

**Read-Alikes** *Source: NoveList*

***The Shadow of the Wind*** by Carlos Ruiz Zafon

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1221962>

(Call number: Fiction Zafon)

The wildly popular gothic novel- now in a stunning new package "A secret's worth depends on the people from whom it must be kept," begins Carlos Ruiz Zafón's astounding novel of postwar Barcelona. But more than four years after its initial paperback publication, the secret is out-the novel remains a favorite of booksellers and readers alike.

***Carry Me Down*** by Maria Joan Hyland

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1263607>

(Call number: Fiction Hyland)

*Carry Me Down* is an engrossing story that at its heart examines an adolescent's difficulties navigating the world. John Egan is a misfit — a twelve-year-old in the body of a grown man with the voice of a giant — who diligently keeps track of the lies large and small that are told to him. John's been able to detect lies for as long as he can remember; it's a source of power but also great consternation for someone so young.

***The Willow Field*** by William Kittredge

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1281525>

(Call number: Fiction Kittredge)

An epic that stretches over the twentieth century, from the settlers, cowboys, and gamblers who opened up this country to the landholders and politicians who ran it. Rossie Benasco's horseback existence begins when he's fifteen and culminates in a thousand-mile drive of more than two hundred head of horses through the Rockies into Calgary, through Oregon, Idaho, and Montana, across virgin wilderness, failed homesteads, ghost towns, squatters' camps, and Indian settlements. It's a journey that leads him, ultimately, to Eliza Stevenson and a love so powerful that his vocational aimlessness is focused only by his desire to spend his life with her: whether on her family ranch in the Bitterroot, which will prove their best refuge from a century fraught with war and civil strife, or on sojourns in Hawaii and Guam during World War II, or in the horse-trading business in California, or on the campaign trail throughout Montana.

***Farewell Summer*** by Ray Bradbury

<http://www.aadl.org/catalog/record/1272998>

(Call number: Fiction Bradbury)

In a summer that refuses to end, in the deceiving warmth of earliest October, civil war has come to Green Town, Illinois. It is the age-old conflict: the young against the elderly, for control of the clock that ticks their lives ever forward. The first cap-pistol shot heard 'round the town is dead accurate, felling an old man in his tracks, compelling town elder and school board despot Mr. Calvin C.

Quartermain to marshal his graying forces and declare total war on the assassin, thirteen-year-old Douglas Spaulding, and his downy-cheeked cohorts. Doug and his cronies, however, are most worthy adversaries who should not be underestimated, as they plan and execute daring campaigns-matching old Quartermain's experience and cunning with their youthful enthusiasm and devil-may-care determination to hold on forever to childhood's summer. Yet time must ultimately be the victor, with valuable revelations for those on both sides of the conflict.

*Summaries from AADL.org Catalog*

