**Reading Group Guide for *The Lark***

*The Lark* is set during the spring and part of the summer of 2008 in a small West Texas town—Sulfur Gap, county seat of Sandstone County. Other nearby places include sister city, Briargrove, and Matilda, site of a prison.

1. How important is the small-town rural setting? What about the regional setting—could the events of the book occur in another regional setting? What does the geography of West Texas add?

2. What are some other places that provide a backdrop for the lives of the characters in *The Lark?* Which places are most vivid to you? What does Charley’s workplace, the Wild Hare Salon, add to the story? Hopper’s Dance Hall?

3. Many important events are associated with the 1998 Buick Skylark—it becomes a major prop in the trajectory of the novel. What are some milestones associated with the Skylark?

4. Another car, the “vintage” Renault, appears. What does “The No” episode reveal about Charley’s character? How does the value of the Renault change in the eyes of others? How does the story of the Renault parallel what’s going on in the bigger picture?

5. Charley’s inner conflicts drive the major plotline. What would you identify as the main issues or problems that he struggles with? What made Charley decide to stay out of romantic entanglements for a while?

6. April Bristow Erwin, Charley’s mother, copes with her own struggles—she escapes from her sad life through booze, food, and obsessive television-watching. Why?

7. What are April’s secret fears, and how have they affected Charley’s life? her life?

8. What is Wayne’s role, other than Charley’s “facilitator”? In what way is he a “mature mirror” of Charley?

9. Are there other mirroring characters in the book? What about the women in Charley’s life?

10. Pick a few adjectives to describe Frank Bristow. How does he misuse religion? Even though Charley never met him, how did Frank influence Charley’s life?

11. How does the old windmill on Wayne’s property figure into the novel? What ideas or qualities does it represent? Thinking again about the Buick Skylark, does the windmill have any metaphorical qualities?

12. Elements of a quest can be found in *The Lark*—a hero who possesses special skills leaves his familiar surroundings, journeys to an unknown place, faces challenges in doing so, receives help from “supernatural” sources, and returns with new knowledge or treasure to enrich his community. Keeping in mind that the quest can be both an outward trip and an inward journey, where do you see these elements?

13. Humor plays an important role. What does humor add to the novel?

14. How does Charley’s image of himself change as he learns his lost family history? How was Charley affected by not knowing who his father was and having to give up on asking?

15. In what way does learning about her family affect April?

16. How does Charley’s relationship with his mother change?

17. Why is Lou central to both Charley’s and April’s finding family? In what other ways does Lou become important to Charley?

18. Besides becoming his love interest, Darla is also Charley’s teacher. In what way is she his teacher?

19. The importance of belonging is a general theme. At what point in the novel is this idea most apparent? What subplots support the theme?

20. What is the role of music throughout the novel? Does it contribute to humor and irony? To the emotional tone?

21. Other than as the model of the car, how does the idea of a skylark figure into the novel? The Buick’s “theme song,” Hoagy Carmichael’s “Skylark,” catches Charley by surprise and forces him to continue facing his issues. How does this happen?

22. Speaking of birds, what evocative bird other than the lark appears?

23. Sulfur Gap’s history and Charley’s history bring out the importance of the past. Has Charley avoided his past? Why has he avoided the town’s Railroad Celebration? What progress do we see in Charley as he joins the festivities?

24. What meanings does the book’s title suggest?

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