



# Reading & Craft Guide

This reading guide is designed for use in book clubs, classrooms, and workshops. There are questions for generating discussion ( → ) and questions for generating creative writing ( ○ ).

- After reading *Acid West*, how do you feel about Southern New Mexico? What are the intriguing aspects of SNM that you'd like to explore more, either through reading or travel? How did this essay collection change your preconceptions about New Mexico? How did it affect your thinking about its place in the history of the United States?
- How would you characterize the narrative voice of these essays? What effect does this style have on your understanding of Southern New Mexico and the stories from that region that Wheeler relates?
- Although this is a collection of essays, there are themes and motifs developed throughout. What are some of these themes and motifs and how do they develop from one essay to the next?
- Unexpected connections and juxtapositions are common in *Acid West*, often of morally opposed or counterintuitive things. For example, in "The Light of God", drone warfare, a nefarious or at least morally ambiguous phenomenon, is compared and contrasted with baseball, a benign or even righteous American tradition. What are some other surprising or intriguing juxtapositions you found in these essays? What effect do they have on your experience of the book?
- Lyricism seems an essential part of these essays, but they are also full of archival research and traditional reporting. Discuss how the traditional "learning" aspect of reading nonfiction relates to the "art" of the essays in this collection? How does the lyricism alter the process of learning?

## **SNM**

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### **AN INTRODUCTION**

- The introduction is perhaps the most impressionistic essay in the collection. Rather than following a character or particular event, we are invited into the enigma of Southern New Mexico by experiencing it in flashes, with wordplay and inventive language, with exotic and intriguing imagery. What is the main purpose of the essay? How does it prepare you for the more specifically focused essays that follow?
- Think of your home. Is there a way to make an outsider see it as not only interesting but wholly unique? What linguistic idiosyncrasies do locals use? What odd geographic or cultural features are prominent there? Use your answers to these questions to craft a short essay that paints an impressionistic picture of your home, rather than telling a story or arguing a point.

## **THE LIGHT OF GOD**

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### **AMERICA'S PASTIME IN THE AGE OF DRONE WARFARE**

- What are some of the ways that Wheeler connects baseball to drone warfare? What were the most surprising? Are you convinced that baseball and drone warfare are related? How do you view each differently after reading this?
- What are some of the ways this essay develops its factual content while maintaining narrative momentum? Take an essay you've written (or one you want to write) and experiment with various digressions to see what might be fruitful in terms of generating more factual depth on a given topic without sacrificing momentum.

## **CHILDREN OF THE GADGET**

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- Why do you think Wheeler spends so much time linking John Wayne to the atomic bomb?
- How does humor affect this essay that tackles an otherwise serious subject?
- We see in this essay, and in several others, sections that feel more imaginative than factual. See for instance, the imagined speech by a "President of Mars" (page 57). How might you find a way to spice up a current essay by inventing a future scene or speculating on what someone might be thinking? Try writing this and fitting it into your essay.

## **AFTER THE FALL**

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- Though these essays usually have a subject outside of the author's life, many provide information that develop a story about him or his family. Here we learn that not only was atomic bomb testing taking place near his hometown, but military tests often happened on the very land his family once owned. How does reading this personal connection affect your understanding of previous essays about military exercises?
- What is the significance of the author's focus on the experience of eating "heirloom chili"?

- Try writing an essay that, like this one, is rooted in a scene at a family dinner. Focus on both the experience of the food, and the experience of the relationships between family members. Allow yourself to stray from the dinner scene into broader digressions about family history.

## **SO LET ALL THE MARTIANS COME HOME TO ROOST**

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- A book about New Mexico is almost required to mention conspiracies about Roswell and extra-terrestrials that allegedly crashed there. How does Wheeler try to approach this topic in a unique way?
- Wheeler coins a term, “patrioia”, that perfectly describes the social phenomena he often encounter in SNM. What word or concept might you invent to strengthen or make more interesting an essay that you’ve been working on? Invent the words and write a few paragraphs explaining it.

## **TRUTH OR CONSEQUENCES AT THE GATEWAY TO SPACE**

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- How much did you know about Virgin Galactic before reading this essay? What do you now think about the pros and cons of commercial space travel?
- Spend some time talking about the role of Larry Littlebird (page 127). Why does the author choose to include this lengthy footnote with a person who ultimately is not really involved with the spaceport?

## **BEFORE THE FALL**

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### **THE VIOLENCE OF THE WIND AND THE EDDIES AND AT THE SAME TIME THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE TEMERITY**

- This essay picks up where AFTER THE FALL leaves off and takes us into a modern instance of extremely high skydiving. Discuss our culture’s fascination with extreme sports. What does the author seem to think about daredevils?
- The author goes to great length to avoid naming the company that is sponsoring the “Space Dive”, so much so that it becomes funny and ridiculous. Why do you think he does this?
- This essay spirals out from a single moment in time, the seconds just before the daredevil jumps. Choose a particularly tense moment that you are interested in writing about. Try writing an essay about that moment in time. Keep your narrative frozen in that moment for the entire essay, but write digressions in which you struggle to understand every aspect of those few seconds in time.

## **RAGGEDY, RAGGEDY WABBITMAN**

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### **SKINNING JACKRABBITS WITH GREAT-GREAT-GREAT- GRANDDADDY AT A WEDDING PARTY**

- This may be the most playful of the essays, and it adds substantially the family lore that is peppered throughout the collection. Does this essay feel more like a work of fiction? What, if anything, allows you to read this as nonfiction? Does the distinction matter?
- Notice that the language of this essay often reflects what its subject might have sounded like in the late nineteenth century. Take an essay that you've written (or would like to write) and revise it with a focus on crafting the diction to mirror the subject.

## **LIVING ROOM**

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### **THE INSTANTANEOUS ART OF NEVER FORGETTING**

- This is maybe the most personal of the essays, taking us quite literally into the author's living room. Why does Wheeler spend so much time describing his furniture?
- How does Wheeler's view of Kate change over the course of this essay? Do your thoughts about her change as well?
- Try writing about a room in your house. Describe each of the objects in the room and relate some memories attached to each of them. Then, revise these descriptions with a focus toward what they have in common. Does a story of your life start to emerge?

## **THINGS MOST SURELY BELIEVED**

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- This essay examines a very dark side of humanity while also exploring the possibility of forgiveness. Did your views on the idea of forgiveness or the religious concept of salvation or the institution of the death penalty change at all after reading this essay? Is the author trying to make a political or moral argument?
- Why does the author spend so much relating a "brief history of hellfire"?
- This essay often focuses on the story of the author writing about the murderer, rather focusing directly on the murderer. Wheeler shows us how he came upon a prison scrapbook, or what his conversations with his sources were like, and even directly discusses the value/morality of writing the murderer's story at all. Why does he take this approach? Try creating this kind of multiple-layered narrative in one of your own essays.

## **THE GLITCH IN THE VIDEOGAME GRAVEYARD**

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- Why do you think the author includes such a long tangent on the Shroud of Turin in an essay about electronic waste?

- Do you understand the mission of the Arch Punks, or more broadly, the philosophy of Punk Archeology? Why do the Arch Punks seem at once excited and disgusted by the excavation in Alamogordo?

## **KEEP ALAMOGORDO BEAUTIFUL**

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- Part of this essay is about the author eulogizing his granddaddy. Would you describe the whole essay as eulogy? If so, what is eulogizing?
- How does the fragmented structure of this essay affect your reading of it?
- This essay's frenetic melancholia culminates in the penultimate section: a long and exasperated sentence that takes us into the author's mind as he runs along the Rio Grande. The long sentence mirrors the act of the long run. Find a place in one of your essays where the form of your sentences might mirror what they are discussing. Revise so that the form and content of this section complement one another.

## **A MILLION TINY DAGGERS**

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### **SCENES FROM THE AFTERMATH IN A CITY FORMERLY KNOWN AS MURDER**

- Why do you think this essay about Juarez, Mexico is included in a book about Southern New Mexico? Refer to the map of the region at the beginning of the book. Why is the practice of acupuncture an interesting way to approach investigating the aftermath of cartel wars in the city?
- Discuss the ways in which the Mexican border has become a symbol for not only the cultural divide between these two countries, but also a cultural divide within the United States. Does this essay make you see the victims of crime and poverty in Juarez differently?
- Why does the author continually refer to El Pastor's asylum as a "complicated place"? What are the complications? How do they mirror the complications experienced throughout the borderlands? After reading the essay, what are your feelings about El Pastor's asylum?
- Try writing some immersion journalism. Spend a few weeks frequently visiting a community that you do not know much about. It could be a coffee shop you've passed but never stopped at, a Buddhist temple, or a local motor speedway. Write about your experience of trying to immerse yourself in this community.