

Rivers

By Michael Farris Smith
Reading Group Guide

Devastating storms have pummeled the already eroded coastline of the American Southeast and the federal government has drawn a boundary, known as the Line, declaring everything below it uninhabitable. This is the setting for *Rivers*, a land of lawlessness and desperation, where no one has electricity or resources and no one and nothing is safe from looters, vandals, and violent storms that surge without warning, destroying everything in their path.

Having lost his wife and unborn child during a mandatory evacuation, Cohen has decided to stay behind, rebuilding his house over and over again as an altar to his deceased family. On his way back from buying supplies one day, Cohen picks up two teenage hitchhikers, a boy and a Creole girl, who attack and nearly kill him, stealing his Jeep, all his supplies and the last precious mementoes he had of his wife and child. His will to survive becomes bound to finding and punishing his attackers, who are themselves prisoners in a commune run by a nefarious preacher with dangerous and twisted plans. He is now faced with the decision to escape the treacherous and sordid existence of life below the Line, including the Creole girl—who he finds himself drawn to—or to try to help them all escape the horrible future that awaits.

1. The preface for the novel is a verse from the Bible: “When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved. “Acts 27:20” What tone does this set for the opening of the first chapter? Is this tone sustained throughout the novel? If so, how?
2. How is religion dealt with in the novel? Do you see Cohen as a religious person? Mariposa? Aggie? What does the author’s treatment of religion suggest about his own views?
3. The novel offers close-third perspectives from a number of different characters. How do you think this contributes to the overall story? Are there some perspectives that you relate to or trust more than others?
4. How do you think the author’s style of prose affects the story? What are the distinctive features of his prose?
5. Aside from Cohen, we learn very little about the characters’ appearances and lives outside of the present moment. How do you think this absence of detail affects the way in which readers relate to the characters?
6. How does Smith instill a sense of darkness and fear in the novel? Are there particular passages that stand out as especially apocalyptic? What aspects of life below the Line stand out as the most disturbing to you?
7. In Chapter 8, Cohen leaves a note at his ransacked house that reads “To whom it may concern—he is not dead he is risen.” (p. 79) What do you think he meant by this? What does it help us learn about the characters’ relationship to religion?

8. The weather plays a significant role in the novel, from its part in the characters' current circumstances to the continued effect it has on their lives. What attitudes are conveyed by the author's portrayal of the storms and our defenselessness against them?
9. Do good and evil exist in Smith's world? Is Aggie good or evil? What about the other characters?
10. What were Aggie's plans for the commune? What kind of person do you think Aggie was before the storms and flooding?
11. Many dystopian novels portray a nightmarish world that turns ordinary humans into murderers and thieves. Could you imagine a world like this? How do you think you would react if you had to endure such circumstances?
12. Mariposa and Evan are introduced as thieves and murderers, but by the end of the book they have transformed. What do you think is their true character? What did meeting Cohen have to do with their transformation? What do you suspect would have become of them had they not met him?
13. What circumstances made it possible for a relationship to form between Cohen and Mariposa? What makes their relationship so poignant? What purpose did their relationship serve, both for the novel and for each of them independently?
14. The novel revolves around each characters' struggle to survive in spite of the horrifying conditions they must endure. What have Cohen and Mariposa gained by the end of the book? What have they lost?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. Smith is a native of Mississippi and was clearly very affected by the impacts of Hurricane Katrina on the Southeastern American coast. How closely did the storms described in *Rivers* and the government's treatment of certain areas reflect the actual devastation wrought by Hurricane Katrina?
2. Hurricanes continue to strike all over the world, slowly eroding the coastline with their powerful force. Do some research into meteorological predictions to find out how much of the coastline is under threat of hurricane destruction – the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration is a good place to start.
3. The commune formed by Aggie was seen as sinister by all but Ava, yet he was still able to hold them all captive and, in some sense, maintain their allegiance. Learn more about well-known cults of the past and the specific characteristics of a cult and its leader: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult>. Can you see some of these traits in Aggie?
4. Have a dystopian movie night! Watch classics, like *Fahrenheit 451* and *Clockwork Orange*, or modern adaptations like *The Road* and *Blindness*. Read the books first, if you like. Discuss how they compare to *Rivers*.