

The Excursion

A Reader's Companion

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THE EXCURSION: A READER'S COMPANION

A Field Guide for The Public Hearth

Note to the Host

In *The Excursion*, the “Public Hearth” (Battle Alley Brews) and the “Private Sanctuary” (Sarah’s Kitchen) are places where friction creates warmth. Consider setting the mood for your discussion by serving something simple and grounding—strong coffee, roasted root vegetables, or fresh bread. As Sarah notes, “The universe might be falling apart... but in this kitchen, we wash up after we eat” (Book VIII, v).

PART I: DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

I. The Architecture of Hope vs. The Comfort of Zero

The central conflict of the book is not a physical battle, but a structural one between Samuel (The Surveyor) and Elias (The Solitary).

- **The Discipline of Hope:** Samuel argues that “Hope is not an emotion. Hope is a discipline. It is the stubborn, grinding work of locating the coordinates of dignity in the middle of the disaster” (Book IV, ii). Do you agree that hope is an act of will rather than a feeling? How does this definition change how we view optimism?
- **The Seduction of the Zero:** Elias moves to the Fen to perform “The Subtraction,” stripping his life down to see if anything remains. Have you ever felt the temptation of the “Zero”—the desire to simply stop participating in a broken system? Why is Elias’s nihilism described as “seductive” and “peaceful” (Book III, iv)?

II. The Geography of the Soul

The book suggests that “The geography of this poem is real” and that the land itself shapes the characters.

- **The Ghost Subdivision vs. The Iron Pin:** The story begins in a foreclosure where the “math was wrong” (Book I, i) and ends at the “Iron Pin” that hasn’t moved since the 1830s (Book IV, i). In your own life, what are the “vinyl” structures (things that rot/fade) and what are the “Iron Pins” (things that hold the line)?
- **The Fen and The Watershed:** Elias believes the swamp is a place where things go to die/dissolve. Samuel argues it is part of a “Watershed” that filters water for the downstream generation (Book IX, ii). Does this shift in perspective—from “stagnant pool” to “active current”—change how you view your own hardships?

III. Community and Polarization

The visit to the Cemetery (Book VI) serves as a counter-argument to modern political division.

- **Frank & Joe:** The story of the Union Man and the Tea Party Patriot suggests that “Biology trumps ideology.” They argued for thirty years but cared for each other in the end (Book VI, v). Is this kind of relationship still possible in today’s polarized climate? Does the book suggest we need *less* politics or just *more* recognition of our shared “soft tissue”?
- **The Saint of Economy:** Mrs. Higgins is described as having “sovereignty” because she owed nothing to anyone and “balanced the ledger” (Book VII, i). Why does Samuel view her life of grinding labor as a triumph rather than a tragedy?

IV. The Role of the Witness

The narrator, Jim, is a “Millennial Drifter” paralyzed by the “noise” of the Gig Economy.

- **Drifting vs. Flowing:** By the river, Jim realizes that “Drifting isn’t freedom; it’s just drowning slowly” (Book IX, iii). What is the difference between “drifting” (lack of connection) and being part of the “current” (the active principle)?
- **The “Noticer”:** In the cemetery, Ethan the photographer dies because he was a “Noticer” who felt the world too intensely (Book VI, ii). Jim is also a “scribe” and observer. Is the role of the artist/writer in this book viewed as a burden or a necessity?

PART II: DEEP DIVE — THE NATURE OF ARGUMENT

The characters in *The Excursion* do not speak in “chatter”; they speak in “orations.”

- **Style as Substance:** How did the formal, philosophical style of the dialogue affect your reading? Did it make the characters feel distant, or did it give their arguments more weight?
- **The Interruptions:** Sarah (The Matron) is the only character who successfully interrupts the philosophical debate, not with logic, but with dinner (Book VIII, v). Does the book ultimately side with the Philosophers (Samuel/Elias) or the Doers (Sarah/Mrs. Higgins)?

PART III: FROM THE KITCHEN

Mrs. Higgins’ “Miracle Stew”

(*The Saint of Economy’s Special*)

In *The Excursion* (Book VII, i), Samuel describes how Mrs. Higgins could “stretch a pound of hamburger to feed seven people with a miracle of breadcrumbs and tomato soup.” This recipe is a tribute to that “alchemy” of the Rust Belt kitchen—a dish that is humble, hearty, and refuses to let anyone go hungry.

Yields: Dinner for 7 (if you serve it with bread)

Prep time: 15 minutes | **Cook time:** 1 hour

The “Miracle” Ingredients:

- 1 lb ground beef (80/20 is best for flavor)
- 1.5 cups dry breadcrumbs (the stretcher)
- 1 egg, beaten
- 1 onion, diced

- 3 large potatoes, peeled and cubed
- 4 carrots, sliced into coins
- 2 cans (10.75 oz) condensed tomato soup
- 2 soup cans of water
- 1 tsp salt & 1/2 tsp black pepper
- 1 tbsp Worcestershire sauce (the “secret”)

The Method:

1. **The Stretch:** In a mixing bowl, combine the ground beef, breadcrumbs, egg, salt, and pepper. Mix until just combined. Roll into small meatballs (about the size of a walnut). *Note: The breadcrumbs absorb the juices, doubling the volume of the meat.*
2. **The Sear:** In a large heavy-bottomed pot (or Dutch oven), brown the meatballs in batches. You don't need to cook them through, just get a crust on them. Remove and set aside.
3. **The Base:** In the fat rendered from the beef, sauté the onions until soft. Add the potatoes and carrots.
4. **The Alchemy:** Pour in the tomato soup and water. Scrape the bottom of the pot to get the browned bits (the “fond”). Stir in the Worcestershire sauce.
5. **The Simmer:** Return the meatballs to the pot. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low. Cover and simmer for 45 minutes, or until the potatoes are tender and the sauce has thickened.
6. **Serve:** Ladle into bowls. As Mrs. Higgins would do, serve with a slice of buttered bread to soak up the “dividend” of the sauce.

PART IV: A CONVERSATION WITH PETER JAMES STOUFFER

Q: In the End Notes, you write that “the geography of this poem is real.” Why did you choose Rose Township as the stage for this retelling?

A: I have lived in Rose Township for over twenty-five years. I love this land—the glacial moraines, the lakes, and the nearby village. While the geography in the book is largely accurate, I did take some liberties to make the story flow; in reality, the Village is adjacent to the Township, not inside it. But I wanted to create an “idealized” Midwestern town—a place that feels specific enough to be real, but universal enough to represent the entire Rust Belt experience.

Q: The dialogue in *The Excursion* is very distinct. The characters don't speak in casual slang; they speak in what you call “orations.” Was it difficult to write in that voice while dealing with modern grit?

A: It was certainly a challenge. It isn't how real people talk at the grocery store, but I wasn't trying to capture realism; I was trying to capture the Archetype. When I looked at Wordsworth's original—and even Shakespeare—I realized their characters spoke at an elevated level to match the weight of their souls. That kept me motivated. I wanted the Surveyor and the Solitary to sound like “spirits inhabiting a condition,” not just neighbors chatting over a fence.

Q: The narrator, Jim, is a “Millennial Drifter” struggling to find his footing in the gig economy. Is he based on your own experience?

A: Definitely not. I come from an engineering background and have spent my career running mid-sized companies—very different from Jim's artistic paralysis! But I have children, and I watch the children of my close friends. Jim is a blend of their generation. I wanted to capture that specific anxiety of being “over-educated and under-employed,” drifting through a world that doesn't offer

the same solid ground previous generations stood on.

Q: The characters in the cemetery—the Union Man, the Patriot, the Scrapper—feel incredibly specific. Are they based on real people?

A: All of them are semi-based on people I have known over the years. You can't make up a character like Silas the Scrapper or Mrs. Higgins without seeing that kind of resilience firsthand. But as for who they really are? I'll never tell. The names on the stones have been changed to protect the stubborn.

Q: If there is one thing you hope readers take away from this retelling, what would it be?

A: Look at the water. The poem begins in the first line with “drying creeks”—a landscape of drought and scarcity. It ends with a flowing river that feeds the Great Lakes. The question is: Where did the water come from? It didn't rain. The water came from the Fen. It came from the ground, from *within*. I want readers to realize that hope and perseverance aren't things that fall from the sky; they are things we have to dig for, right here in the mud.

CLOSING REFLECTION

“The Survey is Done”

At the end of the book, Samuel states: “Our job is not to fix the world permanently; it's just to keep the rain out for one more night” (Book IX, Field Log).

- **Group Discussion:** If you had to identify one “shingle” you are responsible for patching in your own community—one small act of maintenance—what would it be?