

# DESCENT

A Note from the Author

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Questions for Discussion





# A Note from the Author

There's no way around it: I have my father to thank for this book. In 2006 he built a vacation house high up in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado, and he needed someone to go out there and complete all the finish work, and since I made my living as a carpenter, he naturally asked me to do it. Unfortunately, at the time, I was right in the middle of an extended nonwriting jag, and the last thing I wanted to do was take on a real job that would give me even less time to not write. But he asked and asked, and finally, early in 2007, I realized that not writing might just be a new way of life, and so I loaded up my tools and drove west.

When you are motoring full speed down your modern four-lane highway, it's easy to forget that once upon a time, covering the ground you can now cover in twelve hours would've taken months and months of traveling over rock and prairie and forest and river and mud and snow, suffering broken wheels and dying animals and dying family, attacks by indigenous peoples, wrath-of-God type storms—every kind of open-country hardship imaginable—until one day, long before you reached them, you beheld strange immensities on the horizon—the fabled mountains of the West!—the size of which could not be comprehended by your prairie-grown mind, the vastness and roughness of which could not be contemplated without losing all heart.

Over this same country I sped along in the cab of my Chevy, bobbing my head to rock music, sipping from my Starbucks cup, moving way too fast for attacks by indigenous peoples.

THE FIRST THING YOU do in a new house that is ready for finish work is paint, and the painting is sweet, because you don't have to protect

anything, not even the floors; you just crack open the can and go to town. But the Colorado house was big, and I paint the old-school way, with a good brush for cutting in and a nine-inch roller for spreading the paint, and if I gave too much thought to the square footage all around me, I ran the risk of being overwhelmed. So I learned to see only the room I was in, and when that proved to be too much, I'd see only the wall or ceiling before me—and some days nothing but the next stroke of the brush. For relief, I looked out at the mountains—postcard beautiful through the big windows, miles and miles of pines and the far-off snowy peaks. For someone who grew up with cornfields for vistas, the mountains were endlessly captivating.

I'd been going along like this for weeks, alone in that house, alone in those mountains, when I began to think about a family—a young family of four driving up from the Midwest for an end-of-summer vacation, just your average, recreationing Americans who had never seen such country before. Nameless at the time, they would eventually become “the Courtlands”—and right away I liked them. I knew how they felt about each other as they sat together in that car, and how they felt about this trip. I also knew they were headed for trouble—big, mountain-size trouble. I knew they were about to have the kind of experience after which nothing is ever the same.

As a young writer, someone once gave me this advice: If you get a great idea for a story, try like hell to forget it, and if you can't, then go ahead and start writing.

So I went on painting. I painted for another week, two weeks, until one day I got a voice in my head, and this voice became so insistent, so bothersome, that I said aloud, *OK, fine*, and I wrapped my brush in plastic and I opened my laptop and I sat down in the one chair in the house and I began to write.

Here's what I wrote: *He had not planned it, the man would say later. He had been a normal, average man, an honest man, a taxpayer, a fifteen-year employee of the county and a man of faith. A good man, he would say.*

These words are not in the book. Not in the beginning, and not anywhere else. I'd written five such pages, a kind of prologue, before I realized I

was killing the tension I wanted for the opening. I began again, abandoned that opening, too, and began again, this time with eighteen-year-old Caitlin and fifteen-year-old Sean as they prepared to strike out on their own in the morning—and suddenly I had the momentum I needed for the story to go forward.

Although I conceived of the Courtlands as basically good, innocent people who do not deserve what happens to them, I know now that it was their innocence itself that undid them, their naiveté—the merry, incautious way we Americans have of going places, and of assuming our right to go to these places. It's the echo of Manifest Destiny, I suppose: the belief our forefathers had that everything west of the Mississippi was theirs for the taking, all the way to the Pacific Ocean. Nowadays, we drive our SUVs up to the Rockies to ski and hike and ride mountain bikes and otherwise play at being adventurous. But once upon a time the mountains were a boundless, fearsome, godforsaken place into which a great number of Americans far harder than ourselves vanished forever. Living up there in my father's house, I realized just how little of that country has actually been tamed for our usage. The vast majority of it is still as wild and unmapped as the sea. I think part of me wanted to play out, in fiction, the consequences of the land-grabbing mentality of the early settlers, to have one modern, innocently vacationing family walk into a trap set long ago by their expansionist ancestors—and to find out where this one misstep took them.

What goes up doesn't always come down, as the Courtlands learn, but after eight months up in those mountains I did just that—I came down. I'd finished the work on the house and had begun my work on *Descent*. I had no idea how long the journey would be, or where we were going, the Courtlands and I, but I knew we were stuck with each other, and for a writer that's the greatest happiness: that feeling of waking up in the morning and thinking, first thing, of your characters, the next moment in their lives, the next bend in a high and nameless road; the exhilaration of the unknown.

I imagine that's how Caitlin felt on her first morning in the Rocky Mountains, just before she began to run, when the sun was not quite up and the

day was cold and new. There's so much she doesn't know, so many things that will happen to her and to her brother, Sean, and to her father and mother. But there, at the beginning of her run, at the start of her story, the world is nothing but good, her life is nothing but blessed, and I can feel the kick of her heart as she looks up to the mountains and thinks, *Ah, yes—here we go...*

# Questions for Discussion

1. *Descent* has a very strong sense of place, in this case the Rocky Mountains of Colorado and the small towns that can be found on its slopes and in its valleys. How do you think this setting influences the mood of the novel? How does it affect each of the main characters, both directly and indirectly?
2. At the beginning of the novel, it is clear that Grant and Angela Courtland are trying to repair a rift in their marriage. Given what you learn about these two characters in the course of the narrative, do you think that had their daughter not disappeared they would have been able to work out their differences, or was the chasm between them already too deep to bridge?
3. Following Sean's accident, when his bike is hit by the jeep, do you think Caitlin makes a logical decision in agreeing to ride with the jeep's driver? Did you immediately sense that something was amiss, or did you think her trust in the driver was justified?
4. How does the death of her twin sister, Faith, affect how Angela responds to her daughter's disappearance on that first day, and how does it affect her in the months that follow? Was Angela already headed toward an emotional breakdown? Would it have happened even if Caitlin had not been abducted?
5. Following Caitlin's disappearance, the other three members of her family begin to drift away from each other, each going in his or her own direction. It is Sean, however, who seems to tie them all together. How do you view

his relationship with his mother at the beginning of the story and then at the end? Do you think that his bond with his father will endure beyond the time covered in the story?

6. Without ever underlining it as a theme, the novel seems to be about the wrong turns people make in their lives. For each of the characters—but for Caitlin, Sean, and Billy in particular—were those wrong turns necessary learning experiences? If so, how? If the characters benefited from their mistakes, how did that positive turn play out for them?

7. Despite her abductor's apparent efforts to engage with her on an emotional level, Caitlin never succumbs. Given what we have all heard about Stockholm syndrome, in which the prisoner begins to identify and sympathize with his or her captor, do you feel that her resistance is realistic? How much longer do you think Caitlin could have continued to hold out emotionally?

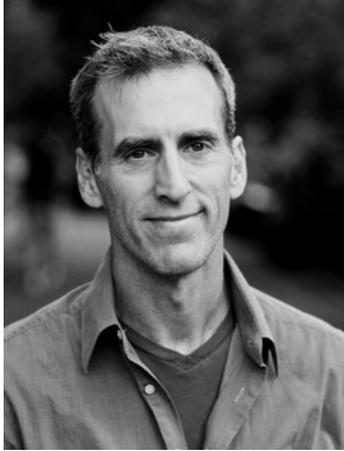
8. Redemption is a strong theme in *Descent*, especially for the character Billy. What do you think motivates him to follow the Bronco into the mountains? Is his transformation completely believable? Why or why not?

9. Throughout much of her ordeal, Caitlin imagines another girl speaking to her—an older, stronger girl. Why do you think she does this? And does this aspect of her character connect her to anyone else in the novel?

10. Billy's roadside-bar encounter with the driver of the Bronco sets in motion the events that lead to his discovery of Caitlin in the mountainside cabin, but the story could have played out in many different ways. What are some of the directions the story could have taken, for example, if Billy had not followed the Bronco? Or was the meeting in the bar something that Billy had been anticipating? Was this a fate he chose for himself?

11. At the end of the novel, what does the future of this family look like, both individually and as a unit?
  
12. If you could follow just one of the Courtlands for the six months after the story's conclusion, which one would you choose and why?

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Tim Johnston, a native of Iowa City, is currently a professor of creative writing at the University of Memphis. He is the author of a young adult novel, *Never So Green*, and the story collection *Irish Girl*, winner of the prestigious Katherine Anne Porter Prize in Short Fiction. *Descent* is his first adult novel.