



ABOUT THIS BOOK

Set deep in the Appalachian wilderness between the years of 1779 and 1784, *The Land Breakers* is a saga like the Norse sagas or the book of Genesis, a story of first and last things, of the violence of birth and death, of inescapable sacrifice and the faltering emergence of community.

Mooney and Imy Wright, twenty-one, former indentured servants, long habituated to backbreaking work but not long married, are traveling west. They arrive in a no-account settlement in North Carolina and, on impulse, part with all their savings to acquire a patch of land high in the mountains. With a little livestock and a handful of crude tools, they enter the mountain world—one of transcendent beauty and cruel necessity—and begin to make a world of their own.

Mooney and Imy are the first to confront an unsettled country that is sometimes paradise and sometimes hell. They will soon be followed by others.

John Ehle is a master of the American language. He has an ear for dialogue and an eye for nature and a grasp of character that have established *The Land Breakers* as one of the great fictional reckonings with the making of America.

THE LAND BREAKERS

by John Ehle

Introduction by Linda Spalding

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“*The Land Breakers* is a great American novel, way beyond anything most New York literary icons have produced.”

—Michael Ondaatje, from “My Book of the Decade,”
The Globe and Mail

FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the tone of the novel, and how does the tone differentiate this narrative from others you might have read set in the same time period? Does nostalgia have a place in *The Land Breakers*?
2. At the scene of Imy’s burial, Tinkler Harrison speaks to Mooney about having “buried a woman, too,” and the emptiness that follows, stating, “It’s not the woman that’s noticed; it’s the emptiness when the woman ain’t there, like as if a man needed his tongue and found it cut out of his mouth” (p 35). Before burying Imy, Mooney speaks to her: “‘Imy,’ he said, knowing she heard him, knowing she was dead but still could hear him. ‘It’s all over,’ he said, ‘and it’s lonely here now’” (p 36). Discuss Mooney’s reaction to Harrison’s thoughts about loss, and Mooney’s last words to Imy. How do the two men differ in their views of loss?
3. When ready to remarry, Mooney finds himself torn between Mina and Lorry, considering the benefits and drawbacks to a life with either woman. Ehle writes, “A man couldn’t have it all, anyway, he thought. A man could choose a woman who was like a sister to him, which Imy was, or a woman who was like a mistress to him, which Mina might become when she got older, or a woman like Lorry, who would mother the children and comfort him and make a home” (p 82). How does this statement illuminate our understanding of marriage in the settlement community? Is this how the female characters are actually depicted throughout the book?
4. Relationships in *The Land Breakers* often arise out of necessity and duty. Marriages and friendships are formed with thoughts of survival and mutual benefit in mind. What role does love play in the relationships in *The Land Breakers*? Is there any semblance between the relationships between the settlers and our own today?
5. The characters’ work and daily tasks are described in detail throughout the novel. How do these descriptions help us understand the characters and the settlement? Did you find that these details added or detracted from the plot of the novel?
6. What role does music play in *The Land Breakers*? Do the songs the characters sing add to our understanding of their personalities and of the community at large?
7. We witness the birth of Lorry’s daughter most closely through the perspective of her oldest son, Fate, who accompanies the midwife to the family cabin for the birth. It is Fate who hears two different perspectives of birth: the midwife who says birthing pain is punishment for women’s sin, and Lorry, who assures Fate “that

John Ehle (b. 1925) grew up in the mountains of North Carolina, which would become the setting for many of his novels and several works of non-fiction. Following service in World War II, Ehle attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and wrote plays for the NBC radio series *American Adventure*. He taught at the university for ten years before joining the staff of the North Carolina governor Terry Sanford. The author of eleven novels, seven of which constitute his celebrated Mountain Novels cycle, and six works of nonfiction, Ehle divides his time between Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and New York City. He is married to the actress Rosemary Harris, with whom he has one daughter, Jennifer Ehle, also an actress.

Linda Spalding is a Kansas-born Canadian writer and editor. She is the author of four novels and several works of nonfiction. Spalding is an editor of the journal *Brick* and has been awarded the Harbourfront Festival Prize for her contributions to Canadian literature.

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the pain a woman has when a baby is born is the easiest forgot in the world” (242). Why does Ehle choose to align the narrative point of view closely with Fate in these scenes? What does this scene reveal to us about Fate’s character?

8. About halfway through the novel, it is revealed to us that Lacey Pollard tried to contact Lorry and their sons after leaving for Kentucky, but that Lorry’s father, Harrison Tinkler, intervened. As Ehle writes, “Harrison had held the letter secret for two days. He had it within his power to deliver the letter or destroy it. He thought it all through. A weak man, he decided, would deliver the letter and lose his daughter; a strong man would destroy it” (p 177). What do you make of Tinkler’s decision? Was destroying the letter strong or selfish? Is it possible to be both? How does this scene affect your understanding of Tinkler Harrison as a character?

9. We gain a more nuanced understanding of Lacey Pollard’s character once he reaches the new settlement and we hear both sides of the story of his abandonment. Did Lacey’s motives for leaving seem legitimate to you? Did you feel sympathetic toward Lacey upon his return?

10. In a conversation with Mina, Lacey raises questions about the meaningfulness of farming life, stating, “[M]y boys will grow up to be like [Mooney], be mountain farmers, that’s all. There’s more to life than that, God knows, and they’ll guess about it sometimes. They’ll come across a new thought now and then when they’re plowing. A voice inside them will ask if it’s not strange how life is, how it goes on. Here you are in a field, how did you get here, a voice will say” (p 257). Did you find that Lacey’s views about farm life made him a particularly modern character?

11. Bears appear throughout *The Land Breakers*, and different characters respond to the bears in disparate ways. A pair of young settlers kill a bear immediately, while Mina befriends a bear in the woods and defends the bear when other new settlers try to kill it. Mooney almost dies trying to kill a ferocious brown bear over several days. What do these bears represent?

12. Events occur in the novel that often seem inevitable, or fated. After Mooney’s violent encounter with the brown bear in the woods, Ehle writes, “He had fallen into a trap that had not been set by hunters, nor set by beasts or the mountain or by anything natural, but set by the fateful invisible forces which moved through the air” (p 284). What role does fate play in the book? Does the role of fate differ from the role of nature and in what ways? What seems to be the governing force of the characters’ lives in *The Land Breakers*?