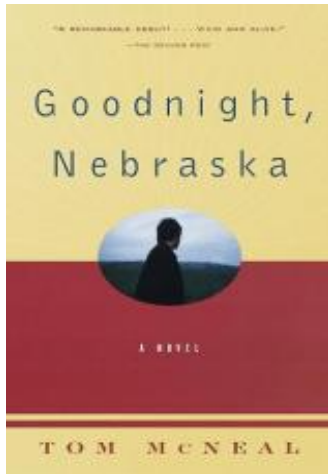


# Goodnight, Nebraska

by Tom McNeal

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## About the Book

When seventeen-year-old Randall Hunsacker arrives in the Great Plains town of Goodnight, Nebraska, pop. 1680, it is with the knowledge that here he has a second chance. Here he can escape violent events back home in Salt Lake City--a shooting, a car crash, a family shattered--and build a new life for himself. But starting from scratch proves to be far more problematic than he had hoped, and he soon realizes that the picture-perfect farm town into which he is, with some difficulty, absorbed conceals lives that are as complex, troubled, and lonely as lives are throughout the world. **Goodnight, Nebraska** describes Randall's ten-year progress, from disreputable friends and a too-early marriage to a renewed effort and, at last, a possibility for the sort of redemption he has long been seeking, and in the telling it becomes the story not just of one young man but of an entire community. In the great tradition of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, this wonderful novel draws a distinctive portrait of a claustrophobic yet ultimately welcoming town without ever sentimentalizing or condescending. **Goodnight, Nebraska** is a book to savor and to treasure.

## Discussion Guide

1. How and when was the pattern set for Louise's wild and self-destructive life? Why is she unable to break out of this pattern, while Randall, ultimately, is?
2. Why is Randall so affected by the joke about the supernormalist, remembering it at intervals throughout his life? What might it mean to him? Do you agree with Marcy's interpretation of it [p. 88]?
3. How does Randall's experience with Anna Belknap pave the way for his attraction to Marcy? What does Randall look for in a girl? How does he define love, and how does he modify this definition as he grows up?

4. Was Randall's staged accident in Salt Lake City a deliberate suicide attempt? If not, what might he have been trying to bring about? How does this car accident parallel and echo the car accident at the end of the novel?
5. After the accident, Randall's right hand, with its missing fingers, is permanently deformed. Why does the author continue to remind us of this deformity throughout the book? What other characters have some sort of deformity, either physical or emotional? How are all these wounds connected?
6. Why does Randall behave in such a self-destructive fashion for so many years, even though he clearly craves love and acceptance? What unresolved issues in his past contribute to this behavior?
7. If Lucy Witt had not found Randall's letters, or if Lewis had not thought he overheard Randall making the crude joke in the bar, might Randall have found his way more easily and happily in Goodnight? Or would other, similar incidents have arisen? Do his early problems stem from the prejudices of the townspeople, or from his own behavior?
8. Why is Marcy dissatisfied with Bobby Parmalee, and why is she so strongly attracted to Randall when she first gets to know him? How does she justify to herself her decision to sleep with him? Why does she decide to marry him? Was it a decision taken for the wrong reason?
9. Why do both Dorothy and Lewis instinctively act to save the life of Randall, the boy they think they hate?
10. Randall tells Marcy about a memory from his childhood: "A kid up the hill raised racing pigeons, a whole bunch of them, and then one day he just decided he was tired of it and started shooting them. He killed about seventy-five percent right off. What was weird was that the rest would circle around and eventually come back because it was the only place they could think of as home" [p. 197]. Later Marcy is reminded of this when Dorothy suggests that Marcy and Randall move back to the farm. How does this story reflect Marcy's life? Randall's? Other characters in the novel? Who breaks out of this mold, and in what way?
11. Why does Dorothy become so extremely depressed and restless at this particular moment in her life? Might her problems have been triggered by Marcy's defection to Randall, with the abandonment of any dreams that Marcy, or her parents, might have had for her future? What might Dorothy's own dreams have been for herself?
12. When Dorothy asks Lewis what he believes in he says "Me. I believe in me" [p. 126]. How does Lewis's character shape and affect his life? As a reader, how do your feelings toward Lewis change and develop as the novel progresses? Who has a more practical philosophy of life, Lewis or Dorothy? Which proves more resilient in the end?
13. Why does the author devote so much space to the pheasant hunting trip? What does it tell us about the lives of men in this culture? How do the day's events change Meteor Frmk's life? How do they change Randall's?
14. What sort of statement, if any, does Goodnight, Nebraska make about small-town life? Does life in Goodnight, as McNeal depicts it, seem impossibly claustrophobic, or is it attractive? What must one give up to live in a community like Goodnight, and what does one gain?

15. Randall, in coming to Goodnight, and Marcy, in going to Los Angeles, both hope to "start over." What do their experiences tell us about starting over? Is it ever really possible to do so?

16. Every young person has ambitions and dreams; every older person has been to some degree disabused of them. How do the characters in this novel come to terms with or modify their dreams? What does Marcy hope for herself at the beginning, and what does she feel she can hope for by the end? What about Dorothy and Lewis? What does it mean, in Goodnight, to have "prospects"?

17. How do patterns of behavior, of love and marriage, of achievement, repeat themselves from generation to generation among characters in this novel like the Hunsackers, the Lockhardts, the Parmalees, the Frmkas? How do parents' mistakes and decisions affect the decisions their children will eventually make? How hard is it to break these patterns, and who succeeds in doing so? Is it more difficult to break this type of pattern in a small town like Goodnight than it might be in a larger and more diverse society?

18. Broadly outlined, **Goodnight, Nebraska** could be described as Randall Hunsacker's search for redemption. How successful is this search, in the end?

19. Do you believe that a place or a community molds its inhabitants in its own image? If so, how would you describe Goodnight and its citizens?

## Author Bio

Tom McNeal was born in Santa Ana, California, where his father and grandfather raised oranges. He spent part of every summer at the Nebraska farm where his mother was born and raised, and after earning a BA in English at UC Berkeley and an MFA in Creative Writing at UC Irvine, he taught school in the town that was the inspiration for his first novel, *Goodnight, Nebraska*. Tom has been a Wallace Stegner Fellow and a Jones Lecturer at Stanford University, and his short stories have been widely anthologized.

## Critical Praise

"A strange, bumpy, and memorable trip through small town USA--a compelling journey into the heart of American life. "

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