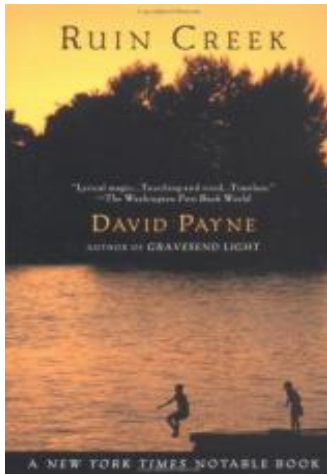


# Ruin Creek

by David Payne

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## About the Book

Jimmy Madden is Killdeer, North Carolina's golden boy and favorite son, a basketball hero and gifted student, who carries the dreams of the whole town on his capable young shoulders. Voted Most Likely To Succeed by his high school classmates, he seems launched toward a brilliant, open-ended future. But all that changes in an instant one hot August afternoon in 1954, when his debutante girlfriend, May Tilley, tells him she is pregnant. As Jimmy and May's poetic youthful dreams give way to the harder prose of marriage and adult responsibility, they discover that love and passion aren't always enough to make a marriage work.

Twelve years later, Jimmy is working in his father-in-law's tobacco warehouse and May is continually disappointed by what their lives have become. The brunt of their unhappiness falls on their son, Joey. Turning to his grandfather for guidance, Joey learns that he must look for joy outside of his fractured family?and how to move from the world of childhood and become a man.

## Discussion Guide

1. Author David Payne uses two epigraphs at the start of the novel. What does each mean to the bigger picture of the story? What is accomplished by putting these two statements about love and marriage at the beginning of this particular novel?
2. How does the image of the photograph in the prologue resonate throughout the novel? What do you make of the image in the photo that Joey identifies as a boy?

3. In the prologue, Joey says that he can hardly remember a time when he thought of his mother and father as a couple. How did it affect your reading of the story to know from the beginning that Jimmy and May's marriage was not going to survive?
4. The footprints on the porch are the first image that Joey mentions. What did you think the footprints meant at first? What did the footprints come to represent as the story progressed? What other recurring imagery struck you throughout the story?
5. What does Zelle mean when she says, "Remember who you are?" Why is it so important to the people of this region to maintain their sense of identity? Why is it so important to the Tilleyes? The Maddens? What issues of class and social status do Jimmy and May struggle with?
6. What is the difference between Joey's relationship with Pa and his relationship with Jimmy? What is the author saying about the relationships between father and son throughout the novel?
7. What does May sense is watching her when she goes for her swim at Collie Pond? What is the significance of May's dream? The drowned boy? How do you reconcile May's swim at Collie Pond with Joey's near-death drowning on the fishing trip?
8. Jimmy spends a lot of time wondering if he made the right decision in marrying May. Do you think he would have been happier if he had run away when he found out she was pregnant? Do you think May would have been more satisfied with her life if she had gone to Philadelphia instead of having Joey?
9. What effect does Jimmy and May's failed marriage have on those who love them? Given what she says in the prologue, do you think Joey will ever recover from their divorce? Will Reed?
10. Jimmy, May and Joey all take turns narrating chapters. Why does Payne do this? How does it help or hinder the story? Ultimately, is **Ruin Creek** the story of Jimmy and May's marriage or Joey's childhood or both?

## Author Bio

David Payne is the *New York Times* Notable author of five novels and a memoir, *BAREFOOT TO AVALON*, which Jay McInerney calls "one of the most powerful and penetrating memoirs I've ever read; it is fiercely honest, deeply engaging, and utterly heartbreaking."

Payne was born in Chapel Hill and grew up in Henderson, North Carolina, a small tobacco town on the fall line between the Piedmont and the coastal plain. He attended the Phillips Exeter Academy and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he graduated from with highest honors in creative writing.

After college, Payne worked as a cabinet maker and commercial fisherman while completing his first novel. Published in 1984, *CONFESSIONS OF A TAOIST ON WALL STREET* received the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award, became a Book-of-the-Month Club selection and was translated into several European languages.

Between 1985 and 2000, Payne lived in Manhattan and Vermont, where he wrote and published *EARLY FROM THE*

DANCE, RUIN CREEK and GRAVESEND LIGHT. In 2000, he moved to Hillsborough, NC, where he completed BACK TO WANDO PASSO. Of this novel --- Payne's fifth --- Pat Conroy wrote: "BACK TO WANDO PASSO quivers with authentic life and is so bold in concept and audacious in scope that it seems like the summing up and exclamation point of a great writer's career. The novel contains everything."

Payne has written for *The New York Times*, *Libération*, *The Washington Post*, *The Oxford American* and other publications and has taught at Bennington, Duke and Hollins. He is a founding faculty member in the MFA Creative Writing Program at Queens University of Charlotte. He lives in Hillsborough with his family.

## Critical Praise

"Full of life, full of wisdom, full of words that singe, sing, and somehow console."

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