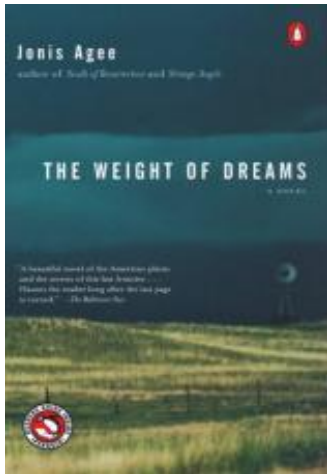


The Weight of Dreams

by Jonis Agee



About the Book

The endless, rolling prairie of the Nebraska Sandhills seems just like the kind of place to escape to, a place where life is simple and unsullied, untouched by technology and noise and the complications that other people bring. **The Weight of Dreams** lays bare the realities of life on America's last frontier—a life that even at the end of the twentieth century can be difficult and lonely but that can also be beautiful and redemptive.

The Nebraska Sandhills cover nearly 22,000 square miles of grassy sand dunes and include the largest and least populated county in the nation. Each cattle ranch averages 8,000 acres and while the sandhills remain a beautiful and sometimes unspoiled land, only a few hearty individuals—like Ty Bonte and Dakota—can survive here. And, as one would expect in a region where life is based on a single industry—ranching—there is an ongoing economic crisis. As a result, the gorgeous landscapes of the Sandhills are interrupted by dreary prefab houses, fast food stops, and empty storefronts cropping up in places like Babylon, Ty's hometown. There isn't much reason for young people to stick around, and it is difficult for ranchers like Rider Bonte to pass their land on to subsequent generations. People like Ty and Dakota are the exception; ranching as a way of life is just too hard for most of us.

In a place where you measure the distance between you and your neighbor in miles, not yards, community can seem like an abstract concept. Yet the acres of empty land that separate the inhabitants of the Sandhills also encourage its inhabitants to huddle close to one another, like cattle bracing themselves against a prairie blizzard. And Ty, after returning to his family's Sandhills ranch to face up to his checkered past, feels the weight of his neighbors' judgment on his back. The townspeople are also a heavy presence, bringing out the worst in him, leading him back to the behavior that drove him away from Babylon in the first place. On the Rosebud Reservation, with its trash-strewn lawns, decrepit houses, and the alcohol treatment center, he is considered a murderer, just one more reason for the red and white communities to mistrust and fear each other.

Through her portraits of Ty and Ryder Bonte, Dakota Carlisle and Harney Rivers, Cody Kidwell and Latta Jaboy,

Joseph Starr and Jimmy Short Knife, Jonis Agee shows us that the Nebraska Sandhills are experiencing the same social crisis as the culture at large. And with their lives dictated by weather, nature, and the land, their existence is tenuous, perhaps more tenuous than life in a crowded city or a sprawling suburb. Indeed, **The Weight of Dreams** illustrates that life on frontier is far from simple. But for the people who do choose to live there, the Sandhills offers both solitude and freedom.

Discussion Guide

1. Compare the characters of Ty and Dakota. How do they handle their emotions? What consequences has their past had on their ability to be in a loving relationship? What do they learn from one another, and how does each change over the course of the novel?
2. How does Ty fit into the stereotype of the American cowboy? Do you think this stereotype is accurate?
3. Discuss your feelings about Ryder Bonte. Without knowing about his own childhood, how much is he to blame for Ty's unhappy adolescence? What is there to like or admire in Ryder? Do you, ultimately, forgive him for his treatment of Ty?
4. What do you think of Ty's mother? How is her life in town different from Ty's and Ryder's on the ranch? Do you blame her for realizing that she couldn't endure the latter? Do you think she and Ty should try harder to forge a positive relationship?
5. What impact has the death of Ty's younger brother, Ronnie, had on Ty's life? How does the piecemeal way Agee gives us information about the death affect our understanding of the incident, and of the kind of men Ty and Ryder have become?
6. We learn about Ty and Harney's assault on two Indian hitchhikers in a similar fashion?through a series of flashbacks that gradually reveal the truth. Do you like or dislike this narrative technique? How would the novel be different if the entire incident were revealed in one scene, at the beginning of the book?
7. Do you think Ty's ultimate sentence for his role in the crime?a nominal fee and a commitment to repairing the emotional damage to Bob's family?is sufficient? How might it be argued that Ty has already "served time" for the assault? How do you think his life might have been different if he had owned up to his part in the crime instead of running away?
8. Compare the scenes that take place in Minneapolis compared to those set in the Sandhills and in Kansas. How does Agee make use of the novel's settings?both out on the prairie and in the town of Babylon?to convey the novel's themes and moods?
9. Compare the courtroom scene that opens the novel to the courtroom scene that takes place on the Rosebud Reservation. How has Ty changed? What is significant about the fact that the first scene takes place in a U.S. court of law, and the second in a court presided over by Native Americans?

10. What has Agee's novel taught you about the plight of Native Americans in our country? What have you learned about life on a reservation, and about the relationships between the Indians and ranchers that inhabit Nebraska's Sandhills?

Author Bio

Jonis Agee has been praised by the *New York Times Book Review* as "a gifted poet of that dark lushness in the heart of the American landscape." She is the award-winning author of 12 books, including the *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year *SWEET EYES* and *STRANGE ANGELS*. Her awards include the John Gardner Fiction Award, the George Garrett Award, a National Endowment for the Arts grant in fiction, a Loft-McKnight Award, a Loft-McKnight Award of Distinction, and two Nebraska Book Awards. A native of Nebraska, Agee teaches at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The Weight of Dreams

by Jonis Agee

Publication Date: August 16, 2012

Mass Market Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)

ISBN-10: 0140291881

ISBN-13: 9780140291889