

Reading Guide for *A Season of Fire and Ice* by Lloyd Zimpel

About the Author

Lloyd Zimpel is a child of the Great Depression. He was born into a farm family in central Minnesota in 1930, one of four children, including a sister, half brother, and step sister. His mother died when he was five. His father left the farm to live first in Little Falls, and then in St. Paul, struggling to survive after failing in a small business venture. Zimpel graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1954 following service in the Army. He married, worked as a copy writer, and traveled about the country with his wife, returning to school to study at the Iowa Writer's Workshop for a year before settling in San Francisco. There he worked for many years for the California Fair Employment Practice Commission and, while writing fiction in his "spare time," published two books about training, managing and motivating minority workers using methods of job enrichment to increase worker satisfaction. Early on in his writing career, Zimpel's fiction attracted the attention of Nelson Algren, who served as a mentor until his death in 1981.

Zimpel says his family's experience during the Great Depression has most shaped his world view, which has affinities with the populist and progressive movements of the Upper Midwest. His fiction, including *A Season of Fire and Ice*, is grounded in the world of hard work, hard times, and working families. It concerns itself with questions of social justice, the relationship between what we do and how we think about -- and judge -- ourselves and others. For several summers while he was in school, Zimpel worked in a foundry. That experience inspired a series of short stories about a foundry foreman, two of which are widely anthologized. An earlier novel, *Meeting the Bear*, grew out of the Los Angeles race riots of the 60's and 70's. He is the recipient of an NEA fiction fellowship and his short stories have been widely published.

About [A Season of Fire and Ice](#)

A Season of Fire and Ice grew out of Zimpel's interest in the history of the American west, including that of his own family. He spent summers as a child on the family farm, headed by his widowed grandmother, who with her husband and children had homesteaded in the Dakota Territory in the 1880's, finally leaving it for the friendlier climate of central Minnesota. The Praeger family of the novel is loosely based upon his own, and the "voice" of Gerhardt Praeger's journal entries was accrued from years of collecting and reading pioneer journals and other books about the American West.

Set in what is now South Dakota, just north of the Black Hills, during the 1880's, *A Season of Fire and Ice* is, on one level, one good man's meditation on his version of the Protestant Work Ethic and his struggles with the sins of Pride and Envy. His belief in the one and his resistance to the other is sorely tested by the natural and human course of events that transpire following the appearance into his world of "a new homesteader, by name Beidermann, [who] has settled to the south" of the Praeger empire of nine or more sections of land. On another level, this novel vividly recreates a particular time and place in the history of the American West, peopled by its fictional community of farmers and citizens of the nearest town, Skiles. Zimpel, however, disclaims the historical exactitude

of the geography and weather cycles crucial to the drama of the novel, saying instead that it is “correct to his imagination” -- with the exception of the deadly “Children’s Blizzard” of 1888, which figures heavily in the novel’s denouement.

Gerhardt Praeger is a man who believes, and whose life experience has shown so far, that so long as one works hard and conducts himself sensibly with probity and reciprocity towards his neighbors, “the Lord provides sufficiently,” and “what is sufficient is indeed enough.” He is thoughtful, well read, a good and loving husband and father to seven sons. He has negotiated with his neighbors to pool funds to hire a teacher for their children. Then comes Beidermann: an arrogant, solitary man “lacking in congeniality” with a team of spectacular Percherons and a pair of Russian Wolf Hounds, “mean sons of bitches for certain.” A master woodsman, hunter, craftsman, carpenter, and water engineer, he is almost totally self-sufficient, with nary a reflective, much less pious, bone in his body. To Praeger’s chagrin, his youngest boys, his twins, are utterly taken with their new neighbor, find his dogs to be quite friendly once you get to know them, and Beidermann in turn is impressed with their “quickness” and work ethic, learned of course from their parents, which he proceeds to put to good use, enlisting them as essentially unpaid day labor and mentoring them in the ways of the land. Worst of all, it seems to Praeger “as if what has failed to come to us has gone to Beidermann in the boundless good fortune the Almighty grants him and I am caused to wonder what touch it is that serves him abundance and others only sufficiency. . . .” Praeger’s consequent struggle to remain true to his better self in the face of the challenge posed by Beidermann’s inexplicable good fortune and problematic disposition and behavior comprise the internal, or personal drama of the novel.

The external drama is about the struggle to build and maintain Community. Life in the world of *A Season of Fire and Ice* is not easy. A trip to town for supplies or to celebrate the 4th of July involves leaving home before dawn to get there by early afternoon. The novel is peppered with references to less sturdy folk, especially those lured West by the false promises and propaganda of the railroads, who have abandoned their land to return home to their relatives in the East. During the course of the narrative, Praeger and his neighbors are visited to varying degrees depending upon the terrain and proximity of their respective properties to the Cheyenne River by flood, “drouth,” fire, locusts, and blizzard, in that order. These natural events provide the context – and provocation -- for the growing tensions between Beidermann and the Praeger family, which includes one son, Harris, who to a contemporary reader clearly suffers from a major mood disorder. Ma Praeger’s observation that he “takes after” her own grandfather, whose life history ended badly, prefigures the novel’s final series of events, which leave both the community and the Praegers alienated from one another, ironically suggestive of the Broken Circle – or Sacred Hoop -- of the Indians of the Northern Plains, whose lands these people occupy, and whose presence and history is part of the implied landscape of the novel.

Study Questions

1. How would you describe Gerhardt Praeger’s philosophy of life? Although he is German in descent and would probably have been more directly influenced by the

Protestantism of Martin Luther, there are affinities with the Puritan Work Ethic of the colonial Calvinists, which holds that worldly success is an indicator of whether or not you are “saved,” or one of the Elect – that natural disasters and other calamities are signs of God’s wrath, personally directed. To what extent does Praeger seem to believe that, or something similar to that? How do the vagaries of luck, or fortune, fit in to his life philosophy?

2. How would you describe Beidermann’s philosophy of life? How would you describe Beidermann himself? What do you learn about his personal history? How might those things account for his attitudes and behaviors? What does the inside of his house suggest about him and his personal history? What does he think about Praeger, especially, and his other neighbors?

3. What are the things about Beidermann that so annoy Praeger, and why? How reliable or even handed is Praeger’s judgement when it comes to Beidermann? Do the points of view of the twins, albeit reported by their father, or the parts of the novel that are told from Beidermann’s and Harris’ points of view make you see him differently from Praeger?

4. What, to you, is the central conflict in the novel, and why? Do you think this novel is character driven, or plot driven? Or a combination of both? Which do you find more interesting, what happens to the characters or how they react to what happens to them? Why?

5. How might we account for the fact that Praeger’s adult sons all live at home with their parents? To what extent is that talked about in the novel, and by whom? How much do we learn about each of them in the course of the novel? What purpose do they serve to move the story along and tell us things about the other characters in the novel? How would you describe the Praeger family dynamic all round?

6. What part do the twins play in the action and the narrative technique of the novel? How do they respond to the growing tensions between their family and Beidermann? How do you think they might be changed, or affected, by the events that finally transpire?

7. How would you characterize Harris, and what do we learn from his point of view about the other characters in the novel, and their lives? How would you describe the other, minor characters in the novel, like Krupps? What roles do they play in the life of the larger community and how does the author use them to develop the characters of Beidermann and Praeger?

8. How would you characterize Ma Praeger? How would you describe her philosophy of life and view of the world? How is it similar or different from her husband’s? What role do the other women, especially the widow Jenssen, play in the novel? What do we learn about them? How does Praeger’s opinion of the widow Jenssen change after Beidermann’s accident.

9. If someone were to say to you that this is a novel about work, what do you think they might be talking about? How does the work these people do on a daily basis figure into the action of the novel -- the movement, or trajectory, of the narrative? Note the detail with which daily tasks are described, and to what extent people's worth is determined by how well, or not, they perform their work. How many skills can you think of that are covered in this novel? What do you make of Beidermann's house and its contents, when the Praegers see it for the first time?

10. In what ways is this novel about both personal and community values, about the need for self-reliance balanced against the importance of developing a sense of community and cooperation. How do these values drive the novel forward? In what ways does this novel give us a look at who we are and what we have come to value as a people today?

11. Do you consider this to be a historical novel? In what sense and why? What are your expectations about historical fiction? What interests you about it?

12. Some might describe this novel as almost biblical, or mythic, in nature. Would you? If so, what elements in the novel make you see it that way?

Other Books

The Children's Blizzard, David Laskin

Gilead, Marilynne Robinson

Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West, Wallace Stegner

Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier, Wallace Stegner

O Pioneers!, Willa Cather

My Antonia, Willa Cather

The Man From God Knows Where, Tom Russell, Frontera Records (A family history based musical story of immigration into the Upper Midwest – nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in Music).