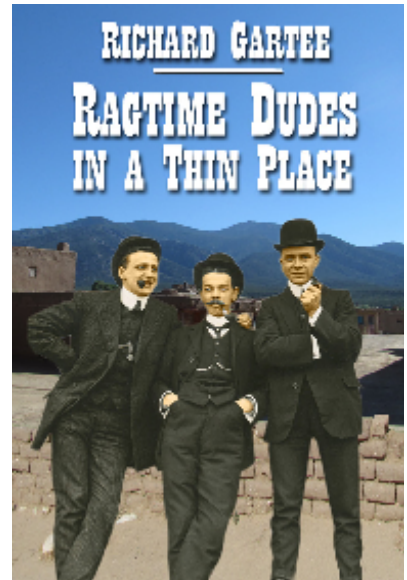


Book Clubs / Reading Groups

Introduction

*This supplemental guide for **Ragtime Dudes in a Thin Place** includes an introductory synopsis, discussion questions for your book club, and a Q&A with the author. We hope that these materials will enrich your book club or reading group and increase your enjoyment of the book.*



Introductory Synopsis

Ragtime Dudes In A Thin Place is a period novel with a humorous bent set in 1904 when Ragtime is in, Victorians are out, and free love is on the rise.

To New York dandies Bryce, Jack, and Morgan, the idea to open an emporium out west seems as brilliant as Edison's lights at the St. Louis World's Fair, where they learn of a nascent art colony in Taos, New Mexico. While Bryce returns east to procure inventory, his partners head west. In Taos, they secure lodging at a boarding house run by Mrs. Romero and infatuate her daughters, Peaches and Cherry.

Meanwhile, in Boston, divinity student Rebecca Sullivan visits her Irish grandfather seeking information on the Celtic myth of Thin Places for her final dissertation. Something she will preach about later in Taos.

Their first night in Taos, Jack and Morgan are invited to a party at Fred Deitwiler's future dry goods store. There, the handsome young New Yorkers meet the people of Taos and attract freethinking women ready to test the mores of a new century, among them, Fred's wife, Emma, and the beautiful, wealthy divorcee, Abigail.

Morgan and Jack end up sharing half of Deitwiler's store to start their emporium. They don't have much inventory, only a few crates of things purchased at the World's Fair, but the men brag that their third partner, Bryce, a New York aristocrat, war hero, fantastic ragtime pianist, is back east setting up deals for them. Shipments begin arriving and eventually so does Bryce, unfortunately drunk. So much for making a good impression.

Bryce is a charmer, but his shenanigans cause continuous problems for his partners. He buys a gun, but is a poor shot. He takes peyote with the natives and ruins Mrs. Romero's furniture. She evicts him. He crashes at the store and damages expensive fabrics, so Fred ousts the emporium, too.

Abigail comes to their rescue by letting the men move their emporium into a commercial building she owns. She takes an interest in their business and suggests that holding teas for her inner circle at their store will turn her society friends into regular customers. But just as the business starts to thrive, the ladies usurp the tea parties to hire a Protestant pastor and are sent Rebecca, a recently ordained Universalist minister.

With too little capital, their venture struggles. Calamities pile up. Rebecca's Universalist

sermons don't go over well in Catholic Taos and the ensuing religious conflict hurts the emporium's business. Meanwhile, the men lose a lucrative Gramophone deal, and while Morgan's trying to fix that, they get shaken down by a brothel owner. Then, Jack's landlady dies, leaving him responsible for her nearly grown daughters. Oh yeah, and Bryce quits to join a peyote cult.

Yet even as the partners fail at transforming Taos, Taos begins to transform them. And by the time the emporium goes belly up, they are ready to start their lives over again.

Historical background

The early years of the twentieth century were an exciting time. The new century was exploding with new inventions, the Gramophone, Marconi's wireless, Edison's electric lights, automobiles, the Wright brother's first flight. But the big event of 1904 was the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, popularly known as the St. Louis World's Fair.

The Fair was a diverse exposition of art, science, industry, architecture, and anthropology. Possibly the largest world's fair ever held in the US, it was enormous. Twelve hundred acres and fifteen hundred buildings, including twelve colossal neo-classical palaces provided a mind-boggling five million square feet of space. At night the fair dazzled with electric lights. The Fair's mile-long Pike featured restaurants, belly dancers, and the 264 foot-tall Ferris wheel with carriages the size of Pullman cars. It was said one required a month to see it all.

Unique to this fair was the extent to which the science of anthropology was featured. In this post-Darwinian era there was a great curiosity about "primitive cultures," and the Fair did not disappoint. There were Pygmies from western Africa and giants from Argentina's Patagonian district. New Mexico, which wasn't a state yet, had a pavilion that featured a tribe of Pueblo Indians. The newly acquired territory of the Philippines had an exhibit of twelve hundred tribesmen who lived on a 47 acre reservation within the Fair. One Philippine tribe caused a stir when they requested dogs to eat.

The Palace of Arts featured fine artworks and drew many artists. It is while visiting the fair that the protagonists in *Ragtime Dudes in a Thin Place* learn of Taos, New Mexico and decide to offer the wonders of the new century in an emporium there.

Today, Taos is a renowned artist colony, which had its genesis when two European-trained artists broke a wagon wheel there on their way to Mexico. The two men became enchanted with the light and the rich culture and stayed to paint. Word spread, and associates of the two artists began visiting Taos, although the Taos Art Society wasn't formed until a decade after my story.

Blumenschein's
and Phillips'
broken wagon



Taos was a tiny town in northern New Mexico cut off from the railroad by a deep chasm carved by the Rio Grande. To reach Taos, one had to detrain at Tres Piedras and pay to be taken to Taos, or continue on the train south all the way to Santa Fe, and take a stagecoach back north.

The birth of the twentieth century also brought cultural, moral and social change. Victorians, their stiff fashions and morals were out. The Edwardian period had arrived and with it, women threw away their bustles, demanded the vote and equality between the sexes, and advocated new mores.

Many may think free love was an invention of the 1960s, but in fact, two sisters in New York, Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin advocated free love and equality between sexes a century before the hippies. They gave lectures about it in Carnegie Hall to crowds of six thousand.

Then, too, there was ragtime music which had become a national craze. The *St. Louis Dispatch* criticized it as “a veritable call of the wild which mightily stirred the pulses of city bred people.”

A Conversation with the Author

1. Please tell us how you came to write *Ragtime Dudes in a Thin Place*.

I heard an English minister describing the Celtic belief that Heaven and earth are only three feet apart—just out of reach from each other. But of certain wild places in Ireland and the UK, it is said, the distance is even less.

Irish Catholics call them Thin Places because they believe that the gap to Heaven is narrower than elsewhere. In them, one perceives a sacred space with ephemeral or mystical qualities beyond what we experience with our mere senses.

As I listened to her, I thought, there *are* places in nature where we feel a little closer to Heaven. But they're not limited to the UK. Our country has them, too. I recalled hearing about Taos, New Mexico, where the locals claim the mountains reverberate with a sacred hum.

2. What was your next step?

I had yet to visit Taos at that point, but I began to research the city and read how European trained artists, Ernie Blumenschein and Bert Phillips began to paint there, and by the early 1900s, began to encourage other artists to visit the area. That gave me a sense of the time period I wanted to set my story.

As I looked into the beginning of the twentieth century deeper, I saw many parallels to the 1960s, the era of my youth. Ragtime was their rock-and-roll, suffragette marches foreshadowed civil rights demonstrations, while Victoria Woodhull, Tennessee Claflin, and Margaret Sanger taught birth control to give women control over their own bodies. To me, the end of the stiff Victorian era also resembled the later rebellion of youth against the repressive Fifties. And the Southwest is home to native religious practices that use psychotropic drugs. So, I wanted to develop characters with these interests and traits.

3. Tell us about your characters.

As an artist, Morgan is naturally drawn to Taos. But he is first to see the ethereal qualities of the mountains and what will eventually be described by Rebecca as a “Thin Place.” Bryce brings the excitement of ragtime and psychedelic drugs to the story. Jack’s interest in all things new echoes the burst of scientific discovery in the early 1900s.

The principal female characters are strong-willed, independent, free-thinkers. Abigail and Emma certainly are, but even the newly ordained Rebecca doesn’t back down in the face of criticism. Even Mrs. Romero, who is the conservative opposite of the other female characters, is strong and fierce in her management of a house of unruly male boarders and her determination to raise daughters who will have a better life.

Except for Mrs. Romero and her teenage daughters, the rest of the main characters are between twenty-two and twenty-five. I made them that age because I find people in their early twenties have the attitude that they can do anything, whether they know what they’re doing or not. I think the body language of the three guys on my cover portrays that cockiness—that they can start their emporium without knowing anything about business. Rebecca too, fresh out of divinity school, takes a job in Taos with the naïve assumption that she will get the people of Taos to accept Universalist doctrines.

4. How do you decide what to write about?

Hemingway said, “Writing is re-writing.” A fiction author devotes a year or more crafting and refining a novel, so your characters had better be people you want to spend time with. I have many ideas for books, but occasionally one arises that in just a day or two the story is almost fully formed in my mind. I can see my characters and hear their voices. That is the one I want to commit the time and effort to write.

5. Tell us about your research process.

I start by reading about places and events I plan to reference in my story. This includes books on the subject as well as lots of internet research. I’ve already mentioned a few areas I researched, but there were others. For example, I decided to have a Universalist minister from a Catholic family bring the concept of Thin Places into the book, but I didn’t know much about Universalism except that they eventually merged with the Unitarians. So I visited a local church and borrowed several books on their history. I also read *The Scarlet Sisters* to learn about Victoria Woodhull and Tennessee Claflin, and *The Doors of Perception* for Aldous Huxley’s experiences with mescaline.

I spent a good deal of time learning on the internet about the St. Louis World’s Fair and New York City at the turn of the century. Then I began writing. But you can only go so far reading things on the internet.

6. Describe your writing process.

If the story is the right one for me to work on, the first draft flows very quickly. I just want to get the characters, their voices, and the plot points down while the muse is still with me. At that point I may take a moment to look up a fact or two, but I try not to get sidetracked by the internet which is easy to do. On the second or third draft I go back and add in or correct details of everyday life for the time period.

At this point I had written several drafts, but had never been to Taos. I flew to New Mexico and spent several days in the Taos historical archives and visiting the area's art studios and museums. I tried to be as historically accurate as possible, but it is fiction, so I take minor liberties that fit the story.

7. Can you give us an example?

John Dunn comes to mind. I learned about him in the Taos library. He purchased the only bridge across the Rio Grande between Taos and the rail station at Tres Piedras and charged to transport passengers to Taos. I don't know if he used a coach or a wagon, but my story had a funny scene with Jack and Morgan that required a stagecoach.

8. Why did Bryce think he could become a shaman?

Because he was enamored with the ideals of the natives' religion, and because he is given to self-delusion. He pursues it even though Abigail tells him the natives will never share the innermost secrets of their religion with a white man.

9. *Ragtime Dudes in a Thin Place* won the prestigious Royal Palm Literary Award. Can you talk about that?

Royal Palm Literary Awards are given as the result of a merit based competition. Books are assigned points in a rubric of ten writing elements by a panel of three judges. The book with the highest cumulative score in each genre is awarded first place. Judging is blind, in that the author's identity is not known to them at the time they are reading the work. Submissions may be either published or unpublished. *Ragtime Dudes in a Thin Place* won First Place in the humor genre even before it was published.

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. What did you know of Taos, New Mexico or the concept of Thin Places before reading the novel?
2. Discuss the similarity or differences in the way Morgan and Rebecca conceive of the Taos Mountains as Thin Places.
3. Abigail points out that she is the only woman who controls her own money. What would it be like to live in a time when women cannot vote and their bank account and property is all in their husbands' names?
4. Mrs. Romero claims she always knows where her daughters are. How do you think the girls manage to keep their extracurricular activities hidden from her?
5. Bryce finally admits to his friends he's been making everything up. What drives him to lie?
6. Discuss which factors cause Morgan and Jack to transform from partying dandies into men of responsibility.
7. When Abigail accepts the proposal, do you think she chose the right man?
8. Peaches has a fantasy about life in New York City. Discuss how you think it will turn out for her.

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