

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

IRONWEED by William Kennedy

Chapter I

- What does the setting of the opening scene suggest about the rest of the novel?
- What do you learn about Francis? About the dead people, especially Francis's mother and father? About Gerald?
- What kind of power does Gerald have? What obligations does Gerald impose on his father? Why?

Chapter II

- What time of year is this? What does the author suggest by saying that "*the old and the new dead walk abroad in this land*" (p. 129)?
- Of what significance are trolleys to Francis? What is Francis's connection with Harold Allen?
- How does Francis usually spend his evenings and nights? What do you learn about the people he associates with?
- What is important about Sandra's life? What do you expect will become of her?
- Of what importance is Helen in Francis's life? What qualities does she possess?

Chapter III

- What is Helen's philosophy about dying? How does Sandra's death support that philosophy?
- Of what importance is Francis's encounter with Rowdy Dick Doolan? In what different ways has Francis run away?
- How does Francis relate to Jack and Clara? What are their feelings about Francis?
- Why do Francis and Helen separate? How does Francis suppose Helen will spend the night? What does Francis decide about his life?

Chapter IV

- What do Roskam's actions with "the hot lady" make Francis realize?
- What does Francis realize about his mother?
- What impact did Katrina Daugherty have on Francis's earlier life? What does he conclude about love?



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Chapter V

- What does music provide for Helen? How is her playing of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony ironic?
- What does Helen hope to accomplish by staying away from Francis?
- Helen sees herself as a valueless weed blossom (p. 127). Does she see herself realistically? What were the possibilities for her to blossom productively? In the end, what is most important to Helen?

Chapter VI

- In what way is the Fiddler connected to Francis? What does the Fiddler say about Francis's hands? What does Francis wonder about the power in his hands?
- What does Francis conclude about all the running away he had done over the years?
- Why does Francis decide finally to visit Annie?
- How is Francis received by Annie and the rest of his family? How is he affected by that?
- What influence do the items in the trunk have on Francis?
- How does Francis react to the old acquaintances in the backyard bleachers?

Chapter VII

- How does Francis feel about having visited Annie and the other family members? What conclusions does he reach about his guilt and about his past?
- Why does Francis leave Annie?
- Of what value is Francis's confession about Gerald (p. 213)?
- Why do the townsmen attack Francis and Rudy?
- After all the deaths Francis experiences, what does he conclude about life?
- Where is Francis heading in the end?
- What were your initial feelings about dead people talking in Kennedy's novel? Did you become accustomed to his use of that device as you read further? What purpose does that device serve?
- Francis's son Gerald imposes on Francis an "*obligation to perform the final acts of expiation for abandoning the family*" (p. 19). Gerald further orders: "*You will not know . . . what these acts are until you have performed them all.*" Make a list of what you think Francis's "acts of expiation" are. Discuss with others in class how each of those acts atone for Francis's "sins."
- Nighttime can intensify our fears and uncertainties; in what ways are the nighttime events in this novel different from the daytime events?

- In what ways was Helen "*a living explosion of unbearable memory and indomitable joy*" to Francis (p. 5)?
- The novel states: "*Helen is no symbol of lost anything, wrong-road-taken kind of person, if-they-only-knew-then kind of person*" (p. 136). If she is not that symbol, how, then, should Helen be viewed or understood?
- Although the purpose of this novel is not to explore the world of the hobo, Kennedy presents a lot of vivid details about the lives of the bums in Albany's streets and vacant buildings. What generalizations can you make about the lives of hobos from the details presented in this novel?
- Novels usually have a protagonist and one or more antagonists. Francis is obviously the protagonist. Who or what are his antagonists? Explain the reasons for your choices.
- What are the various forces which affect Francis's life - his daily existence as well as his life in general? With the help of other classmates, brainstorm a list of those forces and construct a web diagram to illustrate how they influence him.
- Guilt drives Francis's life. Discuss the value of guilt, as well as its damaging effect, in human lives.
- In this novel, in what ways have their relationships with parents affected the adult characters long after childhood?
- In tragic dramas of earlier periods, writers often used kings and queens - people of high importance - as their main characters, partly because when those characters met with ruin, they lost great dignity in the long fall. Are characters such as Francis and Helen less tragic because they are not of royalty? Is it easier to identify with Francis than with Shakespeare's King Lear or Macbeth? What effect does Francis's being a bum have on your feelings toward his plight?
- Will Francis ever go back to Annie? Support your belief with evidence from the novel.