

## Clear Pictures

by  
Reynolds Price

### StoryLines Southeast Discussion Guide No. 12

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#### About the author

Reynolds Price has taught at Duke University since 1958. After surgery on his spinal cord, he is confined to a wheelchair but continues to write and teach. Price explains his prolific outpouring of writing by saying, "I don't write with a conscious sense of the hangman at my door, of my own mortality. But I am a tremendously driven person, and I have gotten more so since sitting down. Words just come out of me the way my beard comes out. Who could stop it?"

#### Discussion questions

What makes the story of someone else's life important to others? What particular events or passages in *Clear Pictures* are most memorable for you? Why?

How was Reynolds Price's childhood different from children the same age growing up in other regions? How was his childhood shaped by southern culture?

#### Additional readings

Reynolds Price. *A Long and Happy Life*, 1962.

Reynolds Price. *Kate Vaiden*, 1986.

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# StoryLines America

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Reynolds Price, a life-long resident of North Carolina, is one of the South's most noted contemporary authors. As a novelist, short story writer, poet, playwright, and essayist, he has often focused on the back roads and small towns of his native region. He resists being labeled a regional writer and enjoys world-wide renown; still, his work is rooted almost entirely in the South. Stories and memoirs arise from the minute and particular details of his own experience, and he is acclaimed for being able to conjure a vivid "sense of place." Only someone who has a life-long relationship with the South could know the region so intimately and portray it so acutely.

As a professor of English at Duke University for the past 40 years, Reynolds Price has influenced many other southern writers, among them Anne Tyler, Josephine Humphreys, and Fred Chappell. He has said:

*... as long as there remains anything that's recognizably Southern—this strange society with a tremendously powerful black presence in it, its very strong connections to some sort of Christianity, a major heritage as an agrarian society, a slave-owning past, a tragic war fought and lost on the premises—as long as there is any kind of continuing memory of that, then I think literature will continue to arise from it.*

*Clear Pictures*, Price's memoirs of the first 21 years of his life (1933-1954), is a fine example of literature based on the continuing memory of southern culture. Price was born in Macon, N.C., a rural community surrounded by fields of cotton and tobacco. His father, Will, and mother, Elizabeth, had courted for six years and been married for another six before Reynolds' birth. Will was a salesman who drove the rural Carolina countryside, knocking on doors, lodging at inexpensive small town hotels, drinking excessively. Toward the end of the Depression, Will moved his young family through a long succession of residences, searching for work.

When Reynolds, as an infant, suffered life-threatening fevers and convulsions, Will bargained with God, promising to give up drink if his son's life was spared. Reynolds, of course, lives on, and Will "never again drank so much as a spoonful of

alcohol." Elizabeth was an intelligent, strong, patient woman whose strengths, Price acknowledges, were the model he used to fashion many of the female characters in his books, most notably Kate Vaiden in his acclaimed novel of that name. The family's frequent moves were announced by Elizabeth, who said simply and heroically, "Pack your toys, son. We're moving tomorrow to a lot nicer place."

Reynolds began grade school in Asheboro, N.C., a few days after the opening of World War II, at once discovering a love for books and his life's avocation—drawing and painting. During his second year in school, Reynolds welcomed the birth of his only sibling, his brother Bill. In 1944 the family returned to Warren County, where Reynolds became attached to the farm children and families who would later become the characters of his early novels and stories. Finally in 1947 the family moved to Raleigh—their 13th home in 14 years—where Reynolds completed high school and entered Duke University, blossoming under a succession of fine teachers and mentors who encouraged him to pursue a writing career in earnest.

So the first 21 years of Reynolds Price's life were relatively happy and comprised of events that were mostly ordinary. It is the evocative details of his early memories and his candid meditations on the meaning of those memories that make *Clear Pictures* the engaging and remarkable memoir it is. In the Foreword of the book, Price describes how the creation of his memoir began under hypnosis at Duke Hospital, where he underwent therapy to manage the chronic pain of paraplegia after the removal of a tumor on his spinal cord. Hypnosis flooded him with vivid memories of his earliest years and the people who most influenced his world. Price wisely set out to highlight the lives of the people who, in one way or another, affected him most dramatically, rather than focusing on his own experiences exclusively. These are his "First Loves, First Guides," the subtitle of *Clear Pictures*:

*I'd see my early life, not as a road or a knotted cord but as a kind of archipelago—a ring of islands connected, intricately but invisibly, underwater. And I'd study each of the islands in separate chapters that examined one or more of the few adults who proved crucial to my early tries at trusting myself and others.*

Who are these first loves and guides? In "Three Useful Lessons" Price traces his parents' earliest years of marriage, their struggles with finances, and their victory over private demons. "An Open Heart" portrays an older sister of his mother, Ida, with whom Reynolds spent portions of his summers. Aunt Ida becomes for the young boy a model of love and loyalty. Additional chapters discuss younger brother Bill, bachelor-uncle Macon Thornton, childhood enemies and friends, teachers who encouraged his drawing and writing, and others who shaped his uncommon sense of a shared spiritual origin for all things. Perhaps the bravest of these chapters are the ones in which Price stares hard into the realities of racial injustices:

*There's no denying that, at this tangled crux, a white Southerner born before 1970 encounters his most painful challenge. He's at least lived on into an open-eyed world, one in which he has frequent chances to amend his old complicity. But what's he to think of his older kin and friends who reared and loved him but who also, however passively, supported a vicious racism? The upper South . . . [was] by no means Nazi Germany; it's a travesty of moral distinction to say so. But the evil committed, sustained and concealed in calm lovely towns and farming hamlets was slow and enormous; and the mystery is insoluble like all the mysteries of evil—forget the ignorant or vicious; they're always available for dirty work. Answer the larger, harder question—how were so many otherwise intelligent, morally sensitive, watchful and generous people trapped in the running of a brute and tragic machine? The only hope for a sane unraveling of those blood-crusted knots of devotion and cruelty lies in a case-by-case weighing of the evidence.*

Each of the chapters in the book is an attempt to draw with words a clear picture, a portrait, a tribute to people of great value in Price's early years. Price had almost completed his memoir when:

*... I saw I was trying one more time to make the thing I've tried since childhood—at least a room of tall clear pictures that look like the world and are mainly worth watching.*