

RANDALL SILVIS

"A MASTER  
STORYTELLER."  
—NEW YORK TIMES  
BOOK REVIEW

TWO

A Ryan  
DeMarco  
Mystery

DAYS

GONE

# READING GROUP GUIDE

1. The character of Thomas Huston, a writer, was named as an homage to Hemingway and his novel *Islands in the Stream*, whose main character is Thomas Hudson, a painter. Can you discern any other Hemingway influences in *Two Days Gone*?
2. The novel is divided into four sections, just as Thomas Huston's novel-in-progress was intended to be. Why did Silvis structure *Two Days Gone* this way?
3. Are there any other ways in which *Two Days Gone* parallels Thomas Huston's proposed novel *D*?
4. Many of the characters in Silvis's novels are, as the *Washington Times* noted of his first mystery, "extraordinarily literate." Is it necessary to be familiar with all the literary allusions in *Two Days Gone* to be engaged by the novel?
5. At what point did you become certain of Huston's innocence or guilt?
6. Silvis has said that one of the themes of this novel is what happens to men when they lack, in Thomas Huston's words, "the annealing effect of women." Did the absence of a prominent female character detract from your enjoyment of this novel?

7. What other themes and motifs do you see at work in this novel?
8. Hemingway wrote that a story's end must be inevitable but unpredictable. Does the ending of *Two Days Gone* achieve those qualities?
9. In a review of Silvis's novel *The Boy Who Shoots Crows*, *New York Times* bestselling author John Lescroart wrote that "Randall Silvis gets to the hearts and souls of his characters like few other, if any, novelists." Did the author succeed in getting to the hearts and souls of his major characters in *Two Days Gone*?
10. Randall Silvis tells his writing students that the two most important pages in a story are the first and the last. He says, "The first page brings the reader in, and the last page brings the reader back." Does *Two Days Gone* succeed in doing that?

# A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

## **What are your influences as a writer?**

There are many. More, probably, than I'm even aware of. I'll start with my next-door neighbor when I was a boy, Sara McNaughton. I have no idea how old she was when I was little, but she looked ancient to me, a small, shriveled, hunched over, and hooked-nosed spinster—very Wicked Witch of the West-like, for those who chose to see her that way, as did most of the older boys in the village, especially when an errant softball flew into her yard, was grabbed by her, and was tossed under her porch. Summer or winter she wore long gingham dresses and a wide-brimmed sunbonnet. She lived in a tiny white cottage with an ivy-covered front porch, almost never had visitors, and seldom volunteered to talk to anybody. She had no television, maybe no radio, and, as far as I could tell, spent her days baking bread, making jams, gardening, and tossing errant balls under her porch.

For some reason I found myself knocking on her door nearly every day, especially before I was old enough for school. She would look out at me and scowl through her screen, and I would ask, “Got any jelly bread?” She always did. Thick, yeasty, crusty, homemade bread spread with homemade strawberry or plum preserves. And we would sit at her little kitchen table playing Old Maid until my mother started calling for me.

When I was seven or so, Sara gave me my first hardcover book. An illustrated copy of *The Swiss Family Robinson*. I can still see the bright greens and yellows of the cover art. I felt like a

millionaire. And I was hooked. Sara and books and jelly bread. To a lonely little boy in a hardscrabble village, they were the closest thing to comfort and salvation I had back then.

Later there was Hemingway with his deceptive simplicity and masterful subtext. Faulkner with his lush prolixity and steamy, shadow-shrouded settings. Garcia Marquez with his ghosts and bedraggled angels and his startling, idiosyncratic way of seeing a world that seemed so like my own.

And I continue to be influenced and taught: by my sons' openness and tolerance and big-hearted love; by the many brilliant women and men who write so beautifully and insightfully; by my eager and determined students; by my dreams, the music I love, the night sky at three a.m., a smile from a stranger. Everywhere I look there's another inspiration.

**If you hadn't become a writer, what would you be doing now?**

Before I decided to become a writer, around the age of twenty-one, what I really wanted was to be a songwriter. I wanted to be the next Paul Simon. When I wasn't reading I was banging away on the family piano, writing song after song after song. I taught myself to play piano and guitar and to do musical notation, but I was too shy and insecure to ever share the songs with anyone.

During my first two years in college, where, for lack of any semblance of true ambition, I was studying to be an accountant, I spent all my spare time hanging out in the music rooms, sometimes tinkling away at a piano but mostly just sitting there with the door open so I could eavesdrop on all the real student musicians. I envied them and was intimidated by their talent and technical knowledge. I ached to be a music major. Music has the power, like no other force on earth, to fill us with emotion and

to connect us with one another in some mysterious alchemical transcendence of even our basest human shortcomings.

Fortunately, in my junior year, two professors, during the same week, took me aside to comment positively on a couple of writing assignments. Both told me I had talent and asked if I had ever considered being a writer. I grabbed that suggestion like a drowning man grabbing a chunk of Styrofoam. And so began my self-education as a writer. And I learned, through Hemingway and others, that the written word can possess music too.

So, in answer to the question *What would I be doing if I hadn't become a writer?* I honestly don't know. I only know that everything I've done of any importance derives from two activities—trying to be the best father I can, and trying to be the best writer I can.

### **How would you define or characterize your writing?**

I've written in several genres of fiction, and I also love creative nonfiction. But I suspect you're asking a bigger question than that—one that asks me to account for what and how I write, especially in regards to fiction. In order to answer that, a couple points of reference are required. At one end of the contemporary fiction spectrum, let's say we have commercial, mass market, plot-driven genre fiction. At the other end we have plotless literary fiction. I see my own work as being smack dab in the middle of that spectrum.

I'll explain. I started out as a literary writer. My first book was awarded the Drue Heinz Literature Prize by Joyce Carol Oates. So what does it mean to be a literary writer? It means that theme and character development, the character's inner journey, are the most important elements to the story. Prior to the arrival of minimalism, it also meant that distinctive language was important, as were setting and mood and tone. Minimalism, to my mind,

came into vogue in the late seventies and sucked all the lifeblood out of American fiction by employing pedestrian prose, vague settings, and a universal theme that life is bleak and meaningless. Fortunately, true minimalism died an early death, and in general contemporary literary fiction has gravitated away from that stark end of the spectrum. But literary fiction has still not yet fully reembraced the importance of plot.

And that is the most apparent difference between a genre novel and a literary novel. In the genre novel, plot is king; the story is typically driven by the need to resolve an external problem, such as saving the world from an asteroid, banishing an evil wizard to another dimension, or identifying and capturing a serial killer. The protagonist is often one-dimensional and does not change from the beginning of the novel to the end. In a literary novel, there often is no external problem to resolve; the story is driven by the protagonist's emotional or psychological need—for love, for acceptance, for understanding, and so forth.

I wrote my first mystery novel in the early nineties. My agent's response was that the novel was too well written to market as a mystery, and the plot was too strong to market as a literary novel. I said, "It's a literary mystery." He said, "There's no such thing." I said, "That's why I wrote one."

I ended up marketing that novel on my own, and that's the kind of crime novel I've been writing ever since: one that pays attention to theme, deep characterization and character growth, dialogue with subtext, imagistic description, some interesting twist on structure when possible, and prose that, when applicable, reaches for the musical and poetic. *And* a fully developed plot.

Earlier in my career I described myself as a literary writer who never abandoned plot, and I think that definition still holds. Even in my noncrime novels I aim for a beginning, a middle, and an

end, though the plot in those stories focuses on the character's inner journey and not on some external goal.

Readers who prefer commercial mass market mysteries, which emphasize plot over any other element, might find my descriptions of setting and my characters' introspections and inner struggles distracting from the external goal. But for me, the resolution of the external problem is not of primary importance, but serves to reveal and test character and drive it toward a changed state of awareness. For me, character growth is the most important part of a novel. The addition of a compelling plot with an external goal helps to bring about that inner growth.

It's probably fair to say that I'm a throwback to the generation of writers preceding my own generation. I continue to reread Hemingway (who was not a minimalist, by the way, no matter what the minimalists claim), Steinbeck, Eudora Welty, and other masters of the twentieth century. I also read a few of today's younger literary writers, but generally only their short stories. Like most readers, I need something to happen in a novel, but I also need those events to have meaning and application to the soul of humanity.