

“Fidelity” Discussion Guide

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About Wendell Berry

Poet, essayist, farmer, and novelist Wendell Berry was born on August 5, 1934, in New Castle, Kentucky. He attended the University of Kentucky at Lexington where he received a BA in English in 1956 and an MA in 1957. Berry is the author of more than thirty books of poetry, essays, and novels. About his work, a reviewer for the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote: “Berry’s poems shine with the gentle wisdom of a craftsman who has thought deeply about the paradoxical strangeness and wonder of life.” He has taught at New York University and at the University of Kentucky. Among his honors and awards are fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, and the National Humanities Medal. Wendell Berry lives on a farm in Port Royal, Kentucky.

Discussion Questions

1. Did you like the story? Why or why not? Does it feel believable to you? What does the title mean to you?
2. Near the beginning of the story, Berry writes: “*Are you—are we—just going to let him die like an old animal?*” Hannah asked. And Nathan, resistant and grouchy in his discomfort, said, “*An old animal is maybe what he wants to die like*” (p. 2). What does this tell you about the family?
3. Berry describes the doctor as speaking “like a man in a glass booth” (p. 3). How does the doctor react to the family? What might he have done differently?
4. Berry writes about the family: “Loving him, wanting to help him, they had given him over to ‘the best of modern medical care’—which meant, as they now saw, that they had abandoned him.” (p. 3) Why do you think they felt this way?
5. Berry writes: *In the hospital, Burley’s body had seemed to Danny to be off in another world; he had not been able to rid himself of the feeling that he was looking at it through a lens or a window. Here, the old body seemed to belong to this world absolutely, it was so accepting now of all that had come to it, even its death.* (p. 25) What values does Danny demonstrate when he kidnaps Burley from the hospital? How does nature figure into his choices?
6. Berry writes that the law exists to serve “all the many things that are above it. Love.” (p. 32) What do you think about the role of law in medical care?
7. What do you think of the end of the story?
8. What is the role of community in this story? What values does the community demonstrate in its reaction to Burley’s illness and death? How do these values compare to the ones demonstrated by the hospital professionals?