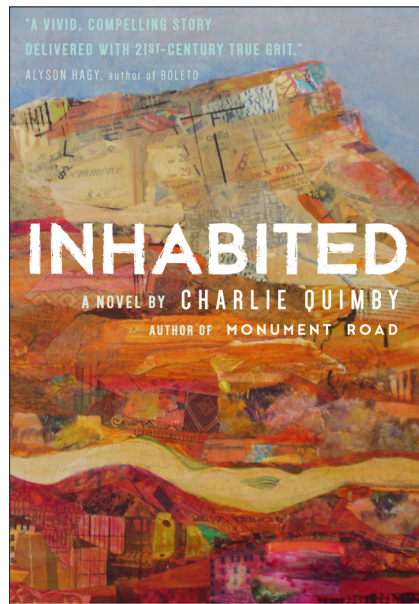




READING GROUP GUIDE

INHABITED

a novel
by Charlie Quimby



Introduction

Meg Mogrin sells pricey houses, belongs to the mayor's inner circle, and knows more than she's letting on about her sister's death. Isaac Samson lives in a tent and believes Thomas Edison invented the Reagan presidency. When their hometown attracts a game-changing development, Meg must decide between maintaining her ordered world and facing hard truths about her profession and past.

"*Inhabited* is a dramatic, honest, humane portrait of a Colorado city in the throes of great change and great choice. We're all in the mix here—rich and poor, homeless and over-housed, rancher and eco-activist, native politician and outside scoundrel. *Inhabited* is a vivid, compelling story delivered with 21st-century true grit."

—ALYSON HAGY, author of *Boleto*

"A thoroughly enjoyable novel that masterfully takes the reader on an emotionally rewarding exploration of 'home' and the power the concept has on the human psyche."

—JONATHAN ODELL, author of *Miss Hazel and the Rosa Parks League*

Inhabited Conversation Starters

1. In the opening scene, we learn the town is planning to eradicate tamarisk, an invasive species, which will remove the cover for undesirable camps. The tamarisk has deep, hard-to-eradicate roots. The “vagrants” are people commonly believed to be without roots, yet they, too, resist being dislodged. Lew Hungerman is also an outsider. He is welcomed because he promises to bring new prosperity to the valley, but he is also subject to suspicion. What are some of the ways the novel develops these themes of alien/native and desiring change while also resisting it? What other themes are set up in the first scene? How are these resolved in the last part of the novel?
2. *Inhabited* employs shifting points of view, character doubling and other techniques to deepen the reader’s experience. For example, Meg and Isaac provide contrasting perspectives on shelter and family and the effects of economics on people. What other pairings did you see in the novel? How did they affect your understanding of the people, the community and the larger issues in the story?
3. In one scene, Isaac loses his new laptop and the key to the house of a dying man he has been assisting. What do those two items represent to him? What does his reaction to their loss tell you about the character?
4. Responding to loss is a major theme in the novel. The weight of the past is apparent throughout the story: Meg’s desire to succeed against her sense of having failed or fallen short; Isaac’s alienation from his family and how it shapes his quest for fulfillment and independence; the town’s desire to overcome a legacy of environmental exploitation and speculative abandonment; Marian Samson’s struggle to maintain hope at a point when her life seems to have been decided for her. Discuss how the author represents these dimensions, such as when Meg says, “I hate being reminded of loss,” and Pandora responds, “Then what’s left to remember?”
5. Homelessness is another major theme. The author presents aspects of homeless living, its causes and effects, yet he has said he did not begin to convey its variety or complexity. How did this portrayal conform with your impressions of homelessness? Did the book change your understanding? As a result, will you respond differently to homeless people? What are some challenges of engaging the reader in social issues? Did the author meet them?
6. The novel suggests that for all people, including the unsheltered, home is not only about the safety and security of a dwelling. It about useful employment, relationships and rootedness in a place. It has spiritual as well as practical dimensions. Describe a scene in which one of these dimensions resonated with you.
7. The story shows how the community responds to two different attempts at creating a sort of utopia. Hungerman proposes to burnish the town’s image and rescue its economy. Wesley Chambers and Zack Nicolai try to establish Thistle town, a tent city run by its occupants. Despite their desires for community, Meg and Isaac are both very isolated in their personal lives. Discuss ways this tension between independence and community plays out.
8. How much “goodness” is fair to ask of us? Meg strives to live a good life that is both materially comfortable and relates to others in a moral, Golden Rule way. But she also perceives dysfunction and evil in the world and has felt its effects and is mistrustful. She is conflicted about the roles she is asked to play with Lew Hungerman and the Homeless Coalition. And her involvement in Neulan Kornhauer’s death still resonates in her. Can she really do any good in the world, or are good acts more about propping up one’s self-image?

9. Setting is important to Quimby's novels. The stories would not be the same in another place. For example, the economy, one's sense of being in the world, even the experience of homelessness, are particular to the setting of the semi-rural west. Wyoming novelist Alyson Hagy says, "I've never read a book that 'gets' the contradictions of the region as well as this one." Did *Inhabited* give you a different view or appreciation of the modern west?

10. *Inhabited* picks up a few characters who appeared in the author's first novel, *Monument Road*, and refers back to an incident that resulted in the death of Helen Vavoris. The author has said *Inhabited* is not a sequel but a "sister novel" that tells a new story that arises in the same setting. If you have read *Monument Road*, what do you think about the relationship between the books? Did reading the first illuminate the second? If you have not, does *Inhabited* inspire you to read *Monument Road*?

About Charlie Quimby

Charlie Quimby is the author of *Monument Road*, an Indie Next pick and Booklist Editors' Choice in 2013. He began his writing career as playwright and arts journalist, veered into corporate communications and then founded a marketing agency that now purrs along without him. Along the way, he collected awards and developed the notion he had a few good novels in him. A native Coloradan and adopted Minnesotan, he is at home in both places.

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Charlie is available to discuss *Inhabited* with reading groups in person or via Skype.
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Voices for the Land

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