



## 2010 Reader's Guide

### Neil White's

#### *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts*

By Neil White

William Morrow 2009

### INTRODUCTION

This guide for reading and discussing the book with other readers or in classrooms is offered as a resource for those who want to utilize the book to share thoughts and ideas about the topics, people, and situations in the book, further enriching the reading experience.

#### Outline

1. About the Author
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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Neil White has been a newspaper editor, magazine publisher, advertising executive and federal prisoner. He lives in Oxford, Mississippi, where he operates a small publishing company, writes plays and essays, and teaches memoir writing.

Neil has served as editor of *The Oxford Times* newspaper, *Coast* magazine, *Coast Business Journal*, as well as publisher of *New Orleans* magazine and *Louisiana Life* magazine. He also publishes *Samir Husni's Guide to New Magazines*, an annual review of magazine launches. He edited the anthology *Ten-Minute Plays from Oxford*. His essay, "A Journey in Journalism: From Idealism to Bankruptcy," was published in Joe Atkins's book "The Mission: Journalism, Ethics and the World."

Neil is married to Deborah Hodges Bell, a law professor at The University of Mississippi. They have three children — Lindsay Bell, Neil White, IV and Maggie White.

## ABOUT THE BOOK

**Daddy is going to camp. That's what I told my children. A child psychologist suggested it. "Words like prison and jail conjure up dangerous images for children," she explained.**

**But it wasn't camp.**

Neil White, a journalist and magazine publisher, wanted the best for those he loved—nice cars, beautiful homes, luxurious clothing. He loaned money to family and friends, gave generously to his church, and invested in his community—but his bank account couldn't keep up. Soon Neil began moving money from one account to another to avoid bouncing checks. His world fell apart when the FBI discovered his scheme and a judge sentenced him to eighteen months in federal prison.

But it was no ordinary prison. The isolated, beautiful colony in Carville, Louisiana was also home to the last people in the continental United States disfigured by leprosy. Hidden away for decades, this small circle of outcasts forged a tenacious, clandestine community, a fortress to repel the cruelty of the outside world. It is here, in a place rich with history, where the Mississippi River briefly runs north, amidst an unlikely mix of leprosy patients, nuns, and criminals, that Neil's strange and compelling journey begins.

He finds a new best friend in Ella Bounds, an eighty-year-old, African-American, double-amputee who had contracted leprosy as a child. She and the other secret people, along with a wacky troop of inmates, help Neil re-discover the value of simplicity, friendship and gratitude.

Funny and poignant, *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* is an uplifting memoir that reminds us all what matters most.

## REVIEWS

"Convicted of fraud and serving a prison sentence in a leper colony? What kind of crazy fiction is that? Turns out it's not fiction at all but what literally happened to journalist and editor White, who was sentenced to prison at Carville, the only leper colony remaining in the United States, for committing a relatively innocuous financial crime. White's memoir continues to surprise as it presents a witty, well-rendered narrative of redemption and enlightenment. Readers who enjoy clever, off-beat memoirs will devour this in one sitting."

*Library Journal*, May 1, 2009

"Brisk, ironic and perceptive, White's introspective memoir puts a magnifying glass to a flawed life, revealing that all of life is to be savored and respected."

*Publisher's Weekly*, April 27, 2009

[White] "offers a memoir of personal transformation and a thoroughly engaging look at the social, economic, racial, and other barriers that separate individuals that harden, dissolve, and reconfigure themselves when people are involuntarily thrust together over long periods."

*Booklist* starred review, May 1, 2009

..."White realized that as a Carville inmate, he'd become just as much of an outcast as the leprosy patients. Those harsh realities are leavened with tender, humorous asides derived from the many dynamic Carville residents he encountered before his surprising release one year later. An earnest chronicle written with equal parts enlightenment and atonement."

*Kirkus Reviews*, May 4, 2009

## HONORS

- Finalist for the Southern Independent Booksellers Award (SIBA), 2010
- One of three finalists for the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award for 2009.

## QUESTIONS TO GUIDE READING AND/OR DISCUSSING THE BOOK

The questions below focus on the relationships and influences that helped shape and mold Neil to become the person he is today. Early relationships and influences sent him in a direction that ultimately led to his downfall. While at Carville, the people he met there had a profound and lasting impact on him. By befriending people who came from very different backgrounds, learning their stories and what made them who they were, both the good and the bad, Neil gradually came to understand and view his own life through a different lens.

Select sections and questions from this guide that you think will most interest the group for which you are leading a discussion. If possible, distribute the questions prior to meeting in order to give participants an opportunity to consider the questions they might want to discuss.

- I. Family: The author describes his parents' and grandparents' background and influence in his life, showing both the positive and negative aspects.
  1. How much influence do you think his family background had on his life? (41-42; 52; 209)
  2. How did his thinking about his family change over the period of time covered in the book, especially about his father and grandparents? (208-209; 272-273)
  3. What do we learn about Neil's priorities through his descriptions of incidents from his childhood, the scar on his forehead, the girls he chose to date, and his secret fetishes? (7; 67; 117; 140;153-15)
- II. Life at Carville
  - A. Relationship with prisoners
    1. Was Neil different from other prisoners and if so, how? Give some examples from the text that show his difference. (Consider Doc, Steve Read, Mr. Levin, e.g.)
    2. In spite of the grimness of their situation, the inmates find humor in their lives. How does Neil's relationship with Link develop, and how is humor a part of that? What do you think happened to Link when he got out of prison?
  - B. Relationship with Hansen's Disease patients
    1. What was it about Ella that held so much attraction for Neil and made her become such an important part of his life at Carville? (29-31; 161-162)
    2. Many patients in the book demonstrate courage. Cite examples of courage shown by some of the people Neil got to know.
    3. What did Neil finally realize was at the root of his ambition and money making schemes? (168-169)

### III. Impact of Carville on Neil's life

1. While Neil found the inmates' stories fascinating, he ultimately was more drawn to some of the patients who radiated peace and contentment. He also appreciated the nuns. He describes Sister Teresa Pazos as someone whose presence made "a visceral warmth flow through my body" and "made me feel light and peaceful." He expresses his growing belief that Carville was "sacred space." What does he mean by that?
2. How did Neil's involvement with religion change during his time at Carville?
3. Do you think the experience of being in Carville or the prospect of losing his family affected Neil the most? (163; 168-169)
4. What was the overall effect of Neil's experience at Carville?
  - How does his attitude toward his business failures change? (96-98; 212; 248)
  - In what specific ways did he change because of the time he spent at Carville? (E.g., consider his priorities before prison (188); what Father Reynolds taught him (167); and his adoption of new values (248))
  - How do the activities for which Neil volunteers demonstrate his change? (Chapter 54, Chapter 59)
5. What does Ella's story of the coke-bottle garden teach him? (291-292) What are Ella's last words to him and what do they mean to you? (302)

### IV. Structure: The structure of a narrative shapes the way the reader receives the story the author tells.

1. How do the structure of the book and the section headings reflect the author's message in this memoir? Examine the section names and discuss why the author divides the book and names the sections as he does? (see [unnumbered] pp. xii; 25; 110; 170; 265; 297)
2. Most of the chapters are short, typically 2-5 pages in length. Why do you think White chose to use short chapters for his narrative? Do you think it adds impact to each story or does it impede the narrative flow? Two chapters (Chapter 37 (158) and Chapter 68 (265) are only one page. Why do you think these are set apart?
3. How does the use of photos enhance your understanding and enjoyment of the book?

### **SUGGESTED CHAPTERS FOR READING ALOUD WITH ADULT LITERACY OR OTHER GROUPS**

1. Chapter 6, pages 27-32.  
Discuss Ella's story and why you think Neil was drawn to her?
2. Chapter 13, pages 59-60.  
Try to imagine yourself as a leprosy patient. How would you feel when you face rejection?
3. Chapter 35, pages 149-150.  
Neil experiences rejection and understands how the leprosy patients feel.
4. Chapter 77, pages 291-292.  
Read the chapter and discuss the importance of having a purpose in life.

## QUOTES

Choose and discuss one of these quotes from the book (or select your own). Discuss the meaning and significance of the quote to Neil's story, and how it helped you better understand the transformative story Neil tells.

1. "If I could repay my bankers, investors, and creditors- give them a return on their money- it would feel like the money had been invested instead of lost. And I would be back on top." (42)
2. "Link was entertaining but that wasn't the only reason I spent time with him. Link told everyone – inmates, guards, even the leprosy patients – that I was out of place. He reminded them I was an idiot criminal who forgot to keep any money...Link told them I was different. He made certain everyone knew I didn't belong here. I didn't have to say a word." (51)
3. "Carville was full of men whose grand schemes trumped common sense." (102)
4. "Almost every day as I walked to Father Reynolds's study, I passed Sister Teresa Pazos. She was one of the Sisters of Charity, but she was also a patient...Whenever we passed, a visceral warmth flowed through my body. Just being in her presence made me feel light and peaceful. I didn't fully understand why she had that effect on me, but I was beginning to feel certain about one thing. Carville was sacred space." (107-108)
5. "Finally, in a sanctuary for outcasts, I understood the truth. Surrounded by men and women who could not hide their disfigurement, I could see my own." (169)
6. "I had fewer than five months before I would be set free. And to be like Ella, I had to unlearn a lifetime of habits." (188)
7. "As I walked – "*meddling*," as Ella would say- I found no simple answers. But I did find something else. The very act of being honest with myself, taking an object look at my life, was freeing....I still did not know exactly how to change, but I had discovered some simple truths: A good life with my children did not require wealth. It was vital to be honest, without worrying about my own image. And helping others was more noble than winning awards." (212-213)
8. "As I listened to the inmates' schemes to reenter the world, I did not miss the irony that we were being released while the innocents remained behind. We were the scourge on society. We were the "lepers." (271)
9. "I wanted to attend the centennial celebration [of Carville]. My growing devotion to Carville – its history and the leprosy patients – made me not want to miss anything. But I knew I wouldn't be invited....I was honored to take Communion in the same sanctuary where society's outcasts asked God to console their suffering. I felt privileged to live and work and play in a place that few had ever seen. And I was grateful I had been imprisoned here, in a leprosarium, where I could begin to rebuild my life a different way."
10. "On a Saturday morning, I stood in the breezeway entrance and watched Ella crank her wheelchair toward the patient side. Even after fifty years, she had not perfected a synchronized crank. Standing behind her, I saw her waver. She would veer off a bit to the right and then adjust with a longer crank to the left. She constantly adjusted her course. And as long as she paid attention, she would never

hit the corridor wall. Ella veered and corrected, veered and corrected, a thousand times a day.” (282)

## **EXTENSION/REAL-WORLD LITERACY PROJECTS**

**Note:** These activities were developed for use with mature eighth graders through adults. They include all strands of the communication process: thinking, writing, reading, listening, and speaking as well as addressing many of the standards and benchmarks in the Louisiana English/Language Arts Curriculum.

1. Using art media, create images representing Neil White’s moral character before and after his incarceration at Carville. (Possible media: painting, drawing, collage, pipe-cleaner sculpture {Play-Doh base needed}). Write a paragraph explaining your creation and its relationship to the book. Present orally.
2. Create (art media) a symbol to represent the personality of a patient or another inmate at Carville. Write about it. Present it orally.

Note: The above two activities are not intended for young people only. Adults can be freed to learn and enjoy content by approaching a topic through creative arts just as younger participants can be.

3. Working in pairs, write and present an interview in the personas of Neil White and a patient/another inmate of Carville, based on information in White’s book.
4. Research Neil White’s check-kiting conviction and write a newspaper article about it. What would be your headline? Include a list of sources. Present it to the class.
5. Examine copies of *Coast* and *Louisiana Life* magazines. Imagine that Neil White is still the editor/publisher of those periodicals. Who seems to be the target audience, based on article topics and advertising? Write an article that would attract such an audience. Read your article aloud.
6. Read and write an original review of an article from *Coast* or *Louisiana Life* magazine. Does the article have the appropriate style, appeal to the target audience? Include a summary as well as your critique and be prepared to present your review to the class.
7. Research leprosy/Hansen’s disease. Write/present a report on its history, causes, symptoms, and treatments. Be sure to list sources.
8. Research the term *secret people*. Write a brief paper about the term’s origin. List sources.

9. Research and write/present a 1-2 page paper about Dr. Paul Brand, who treated Hansen's disease at Carville and developed medical procedures to improve patients' lives. List sources.
10. Write a letter to Neil White using correct business letter format. Tell him, using specific detail from his book, how his memoir affected you. Ask him a question about his life, experiences, and attitudes.
11. Read Neil White's essay, "Journalism: from Idealism to Bankruptcy" in Joseph B Atkins' book, *The Mission: Journalism, Ethics, and the World*. Write and present a summary of the article. How is White's article like and different from his memoir?
12. Locate a copy of White's play, *Lepers and Cons*. Perform it in Reader's Theater format. (Note: Teacher/class facilitator should read and evaluate the play for group appropriateness before making this assignment.)

### **SOURCES:**

*About the Author* and *About the Book* sections are from the author's website and used by permission.

### **RELATED LINKS**

Visit Neil's web site for more information and another discussion guide developed by his publisher.

<http://www.neilwhite.com/>

Mississippi Writers & Musicians website has an article and links to more information about Neil White.

<http://www.mswritersandmusicians.com/writers/neil-white.html>

YouTube contains a short video of Neil White in which he discusses his memoir *In the Sanctuary of Outcasts* and his experience while in prison at the leprosarium in Carville, La.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BSCpTrLDIgI>

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