

# READER'S GUIDE

*Volkswagen Blues* by Jacques Poulin

Translated by Sheila Fischman

## INTRODUCING *Volkswagen Blues*

In this classic road novel, Jacques Poulin tells the story of a man in search of his brother. In a Volkswagen minibus, the man journeys through Detroit, into Chicago, on to St. Louis, along the Oregon Trail and into California with a Métis woman called La Grande Sauterelle and her cat. Following a trail of faint clues, the pair's journey merges with a journey of the past as their trip becomes a metaphor for the exploration of the history of the French in North America.



## IMPORTANT THEMES

### *Memory*

Memories weave through the narrative, revealing and concealing the brother Jack hopes to find. The path that the man and the girl follow takes them through the memories of those who have met or interacted with Jack's brother Théo. Jack's memories of Théo are tied to his knowledge of the great writers and explorers his brother loved, and in some ways these figures and their exploits become stand-ins for Théo, colouring the way Jack remembers him.

### *Change*

Although the novel's journey is rooted in the past, each recollection serves to highlight the passage of time and the changes that accompany it: bookstores that are gone, highways that speed their journey, wagon ruts that become "something that almost doesn't exist," and museums that house the relicts of the past. Change becomes inevitable as the man and the girl get closer to finding Théo.

### *Storytelling and History*

As Jack and La Grande Sauterelle travel, they tell each other stories about their own lives and the lives of prominent figures from the past. The pair's love of books and reliance on books acts as a counterpoint to memory, as history returns only through the pages of the books they read on their journey. La Grande Sauterelle reads and recounts the stories of voyagers, cowboys, massacres, and wars, and in each recounting she challenges the dominant narratives of Western exploration.

### *Identity*

Both characters struggle with their identity as they travel together, going by names they have given themselves. Jack struggles with his identity as a writer while suffering from writer's block; he tries to find himself by finding his brother. La Grande Sauterelle feels out of place as a Métis woman, neither Indigenous nor white. She seeks understanding through the past, in stories of Indigenous chiefs.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What are Jack's reasons for searching for Théo after fifteen years?
2. The novel is filled with the names of prominent writers and historical figures, but the main characters' names are obscured through pseudonyms or simple nouns (the man, the girl). What effect does this have on the story?
3. Jack and La Grande Sauterelle "borrow" many books along their journey. How do these books shape the narrative? What do they reveal about how we think about history?
4. In Chapter 12, "The Gatling Gun," why is La Grande Sauterelle incensed over the presence of a machine gun in the museum at Fort Laramie? Does her anger change the way you think about museums and how they preserve history?
5. How do the man and the girl imagine they will be received at the ranch house?
6. Is the Volkswagen itself an important character in the story? What do we know about it?
7. Were you surprised when Jack finally found Théo? How did you imagine their meeting?
8. There are a few images throughout the novel. What do these add to the narrative?

## ABOUT JACQUES

Jacques Poulin is the author of many novels, most of which have been translated into English by Sheila Fischman. His works often deal with history — both personal and political — as well as with the beauty of Quebec City and the St Lawrence. In late spring of 2001, he was honoured with the Molson Prize by The Canada Council for the Arts. After spending several years in Paris, France, Poulin now lives and writes in Quebec City.

## ABOUT SHEILA

Sheila Fischman is one of Canada's premier translators. She has translated over 125 books and for her work was awarded the Molson Prize in 2008. In 2007, her translation of Jacques Poulin's novel *My Sister's Blue Eyes* was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Translation. Her 2006 translation of Pascale Quiviger's novel *The Perfect Circle* was shortlisted for the Scotiabank Giller Prize.