

READER'S GUIDE

Blue River and Red Earth by Stephen Henighan

INTRODUCING *Blue River and Red Earth*

These eleven short stories cover a wide range of territory — from Toronto to Cuba to Eastern Europe. And, wide-ranging over geography as they are, they also cover an array of characters and situations that can only be situated in the twenty-first century. A woman from a closed city must find her place amidst the changes she encounters in the world. A man discovers a friend's secrets hidden within their past. A Guatemalan poet struggles for recognition in Paris. A man's life is influenced by the violence of the past, even as that past fades into obscurity. A vanished identity worries a man in his final moments. A woman's life is ravaged by illness. An interracial couple struggles to overcome cultural differences and societal expectations, while a death changes their relationship forever.

IMPORTANT THEMES

Identity

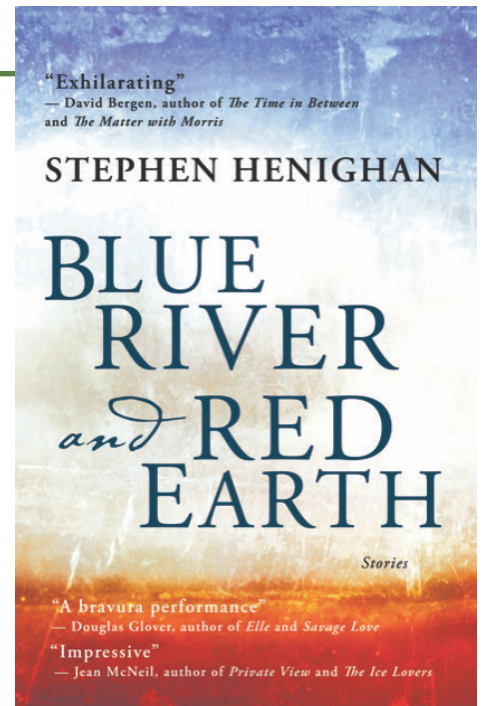
Across the various stories in *Blue River and Red Earth*, characters struggle with their identity. Irina, confident in her superiority, begins to question herself as she encounters new people. Castillo doubts his abilities as a poet as he tries to distance himself from his roots. A revolutionary-turned-security guard feels the loss of his former self. Phillip struggles to resist racial identity in his relationship with Doreen.

Language

Throughout the book, language connects, divides, and defines people. Irina longs for the dialect of her youth, but also discovers new languages to communicate her ideas to the world. Romanian language courses bring lovers together. A way of speaking reveals a hidden connection between two strangers. Doreen is unable to use the patois of her childhood after growing up in Toronto. Racial identity influences strangers' language expectations.

Relationships

A running theme in *Blue River and Red Earth* is the fluid nature of relationships as characters find and lose each other. Sexual encounters lead to personal regrets, age differences cause characters to resist love, and friendships fail in the face of obstacles. The complexities of family and race influence characters' willingness to connect. A family member's death leads to the creation of new life.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How does Irina's belief in her genetic superiority shape her interactions with others outside the closed city?
2. Veronika says that you only get one chance in love. Do you agree with her?
3. How is Castillo's life in Paris influenced by his feelings about Chimaltenango?
4. Trevor laments that "The Guatemala I know is gone." How are history and memory related in "Blue River Hotel"?
5. Why are all the names besides Leslie's omitted from "Dodging the Bullet"? How does this affect the story?
6. The last five stories in *Blue River* and *Red Earth* follow Doreen and Phillip's relationship. Discuss how their relationship changes across these stories, and what their different perspectives reveal.
7. Although many of the characters are Canadian, most of the stories take place somewhere other than Canada. What is the book saying about Canada and Canadians?
8. Why does Doreen decide to get pregnant?
9. What cultural differences between Canada and Jamaica are revealed through Doreen's relationship with Phillip and her interactions with her sisters?
10. Discuss the book's title, *Blue River and Red Earth*. What is the significance of the title? How does its meaning reflect the stories within?



ABOUT STEPHEN

Stephen Henighan is the author of five novels, three collections of short stories, and four books of essays. His work has been published in *Ploughshares*, *The Globe and Mail*, *Geist Magazine*, and *The Walrus* — to name a few. He has translated novels into English from Portuguese and Romanian and is the General Editor of the Biblioasis International Translation Series. He is currently a professor of Spanish and Hispanic Studies at the University of Guelph.