

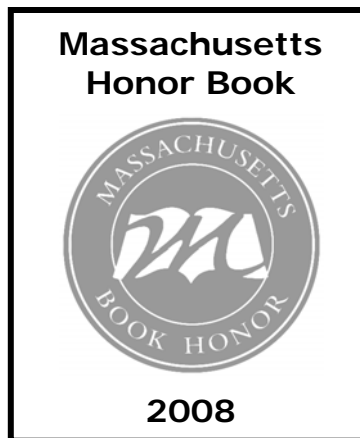
## A Reading and Discussion Guide

### *The Air We Breathe*

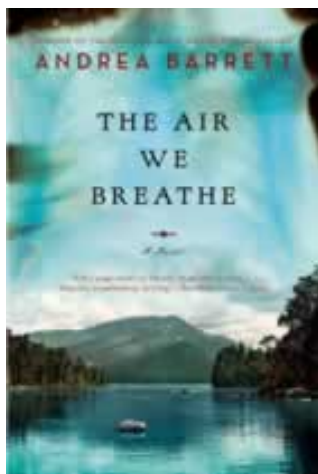
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W.W. Norton

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### SUMMARY



It is 1915 in the small “cure” town of Tamarack in upstate New York. Twenty-six year old Leo Marburg, an émigré from Odessa, travels here from Brooklyn to receive treatment for tuberculosis. He is carefully doused in a tub of hot water and disinfectants, provided with a set of instructions on how to behave and what to avoid and sent to his hospital room to recuperate. The narrator(s) ask the reader to “imagine a hill shaped like a dog’s head...its nose resting on crossed front paws” in describing the hospital as if from the air above.

There are 120 patients at Tamarack State Sanatorium. Leo meets his roommate Ephraim Kotov, an apple farmer, born in Minsk and settled with his wife and children in Ovid, N.Y. In the village, young Naomi Martin reluctantly works full time as her mother’s maid at their home in the village, which caters to more well off tuberculosis patients. She is

scheming to ask Miles Fairchild, a wealthy factory owner and current tenant if she can be his driver. Miles has been granted permission by the director of the Sanatorium to begin a lecture/discussion group at the hospital and will need someone to take him there every Wednesday.

Shocked by their remote surroundings in the Adirondacks and the enclosed world of the sanatorium, these individuals furnish the reader with memories of their families, homeland and aspirations mingled with the ambiguities of their struggles in a foreign world. With skepticism, a few patients attend Miles’ first weekly study group. Despite suffering occasional silent indignations toward this Miles, “a bored boss with too much time on his hands”, they begin to look forward to the meetings as a place to mingle. They share their own stories with each other and small transformations begin to take place. The immigrants’ masks, in a sense, are removed temporarily while they talk to each other and the group. It is also a time when World War I commands their attention – and prejudice and vigilantism creeps into their lives.

The story climaxes when Naomi’s attempt to woo Leo is rebuffed. Naomi flees the scene and drops a deadly “pencil” that leads to a dangerous explosion and nearly destroys the community. All through the story, the author speaks through her characters about the seductiveness of the sciences – Leo’s fascination with chemistry, Miles’ study of paleontology, Irene and Eudora’s passion for radiology, the tragedy of chemical warfare, and finally the biology of tuberculosis. Barrett rescues from the

back pages of history an intimate story about the tuberculosis cure cottages of New York and the inner lives of the inhabitants of its sanitarium.

Barrett may be seen to be challenging our preconceptions about this group of individuals and laying bare the ignorance of presumption, presumption's capacity to foster prejudice, and the loneliness and isolation that losing one's personal place causes. She educates us about the sacrifices of early research that scientists made for the chance to advance knowledge while they reveled in the excitement of discovery. Barrett strips the personal odysseys of a small group of individuals to expose the grief and suffering that so many of our ancestors experienced when they came to America, and, in the end, baring the similarities in us all.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What were your expectations upon reading the first few chapters of this book and how did you react upon completing it? What were the most powerful parts of the narrative and why?
2. Who is Leo Marburg and how is his character similar or different to the patients and others surrounding him? What are the factors that brought him to this place?
3. Place is a very important concept in our lives. We speak of home with a great deal of emotion, be it positive or negative. What are the places in this novel that speak to you? Why? What are the places that speak to the characters?
4. Can you remember a time when you or a loved one spent days, weeks or even months in a hospital? What were your experiences with it? How is Tamarack State Sanitarium different from hospitals now? How is it the same?
5. Young Naomi Martin has a story and a history. How would you describe her?
6. You may have had relatives who came to the U.S. right around this time period. If so, what were their experiences like in comparison to say Leo's, Ephraim's, Irene's or Ian's? How did they adapt? What was most moving to you about their personal histories?
7. There is a great deal of reference to the sciences in the story. It seems to allow us to view the characters lives from a unique vantage point, or at least teach us a little history. Could you comment on this further?
8. What are the defining moments in the life of Miles while he is attempting to heal in Tamarack at his cure cottage? How does his presence and behavior affect the lives of the patients?
9. What do you think of the following quotation? How do you think it relates to the story?  
"We are nothing but what we derive from the air we breathe, the climate we inhabit, the government we obey, the system of religion we profess, and the nature of our employment."  
*J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur.*
10. There are a number of relationships in this novel - Leo and Ephraim, Irene and Eudora, Miles and Dr. Petrie, Naomi and Miles, Naomi and Irene, Leo and Irene. Which relationships peaked your interest or held the most significance for you?
11. Novels speak to their readers in different ways. Some resonate by the sheer weight of their plot and charm of their characters such as in Charles Dickens'. Other novels' plots drive us to keep on reading until we get to the end. How did this novel achieve its importance for you?

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- <http://www.pshares.org/authors/authordetails.cfm?prmAuthorID=87>
- <http://libwww.freelibrary.org/podcast/?podcastID=28>
- [http://www.kwls.org/lit/sem\\_2009/bio.cfm?auth\\_id=148](http://www.kwls.org/lit/sem_2009/bio.cfm?auth_id=148)

## SUGGESTED WEBSITES

About tuberculosis and the “cure cottages” in upstate N.Y., immigration history, and the history of radiography, paleontology and the sciences.

- <http://www.tballiance.org/about/mission>
- <http://www.stoptb.org/>
- [http://www.historicsaranaclake.org/A%20Brief%20History/a\\_brief\\_history.html](http://www.historicsaranaclake.org/A%20Brief%20History/a_brief_history.html)
- <http://www.saranaclake.com/historytimeline.shtml>
- <http://www.adirondackhistory.org/newtb/four.html>
- <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2007/10/11/AR2007101101979.html>
- <http://www.pbs.org/now/society/immhistory.html>
- [http://www.aifl.org/exhibit/ex\\_americaheritage\\_traveling/traveling\\_exhibit.shtml](http://www.aifl.org/exhibit/ex_americaheritage_traveling/traveling_exhibit.shtml)
- <http://www.ndted.org/EducationResources/CommunityCollege/Radiography/Introduction/history.htm>
- <http://www.chemheritage.org/explore/explore.html>
- <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=15240123>



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