

## **The Hair of Harold Roux** **By Thomas Williams**

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *The Hair of Harold Roux*, a National Book Award–winning novel about the power of memory and the dangers of storytelling.

### **About this book**

Aaron Benham, a professor and writer, is struggling to write a novel called *The Hair of Harold Roux*, based on his own college years. Over the next twenty-four hours, Aaron will face a slew of interruptions—the firing of a beloved colleague, the estrangement of his wife, a motorcycle accident, a reunion with an old flame, and countless glasses of booze. All these distractions keep him from writing the story of Harold Roux and his unfortunate hairpiece.

Allard Benson is Aaron's alter ego in the novel-within-a-novel that slowly unfolds. Allard and Harold Roux are college students and World War II veterans, and they are both in love with an innocent classmate named Mary Tolliver. Harold, an awkward and serious man who wears the worst toupee Allard has ever seen, feels protective toward Mary as she falls for Allard. As Allard's friends know, Allard has also been sleeping with Naomi, Mary's radical roommate. Meanwhile, Harold has moved off campus to escape Boom Maloumian, a bully who terrorizes him day and night. When Harold becomes the manager of Lilliputown, a miniaturized resort, Allard decides it's the perfect place to throw an end-of-semester party. But in the freewheeling atmosphere of the party, Allard refuses to choose between Mary and Naomi, and Harold can't keep Boom Maloumian from turning the party into a violent spectacle that will splinter this group of friends, unveiling all of their best and worst qualities.

### **For discussion**

1. In his introduction to *The Hair of Harold Roux*, Andre Dubus III recalls that when he visited Thomas Williams's cabin with his father, "In the presence of these two men, I felt like a puppy among veteran hunting dogs" (ix). Why did young Dubus feel intimidated in the company of Andre Dubus and Thomas Williams? What did he learn from these two veteran writers?
2. Consider the complicated structure of *The Hair of Harold Roux*, with its numerous storylines, fantasies, and flashbacks. Which moments of the novel feel the most structurally complicated? When does the novel's chronology feel most simple or direct?
3. Aaron Benham, as he sits down to begin a novel, imagines characters standing around a small fire: "It is that small fire he must constantly re-create or these last warm lives will cease to live, will never have lived even to fear that immensities of coldness and indifference around them" (10–11). Discuss how this small fire

serves as the seed of Aaron's stories. How does Aaron stoke that fire, and what elements threaten its vulnerable flame?

4. Aaron is asked to help two friends: George Buck and Mark Rasmussen. How is he able to help George and Mark, and where does he fail them? What reasons does Aaron have to help or ignore each friend's troubles?
5. As Aaron reads aloud a story he has written about people from his past, he concludes, "I will use G. and all the rest for my own purposes, use them coldly and without mercy, more coldly than their own warm needful selves could ever understand" (91). What does this story reveal about Aaron's attitude toward personal material and fiction?
6. Discuss Aaron's attraction to Helga, George Buck's wife. What does Helga look like, and which of her qualities does Aaron admire? Does she seem to acknowledge and share Aaron's feelings? Why or why not?
7. Consider the first chapter of *Glitter and Gold*, the novel that Harold Roux is writing. What does this novel reveal about Harold's fantasy life? What does Allard think of *Glitter and Gold*, and why does he hesitate to tell Harold his opinion?
8. Why does Allard have trouble choosing between Mary and Naomi? What attracts him to each woman, and how does each react to his refusal to choose? Does Allard seem to regret his inability to choose? Why or why not?
9. Aaron thinks that living without his family would be "like trying to live without his heart or lungs. They are the forces that keep him alive, shocking him into his duty with the irritant voltage of pacemakers" (306). How does Aaron express his mixed feelings toward his wife and children? What seems to keep Aaron and Agnes together through difficult times?
10. Visiting Lilliputown for the first time, Allard "felt the Colonel's sense of completeness, of place here. To have everything you wanted in one neat, known place was appealing" (289). How does Lilliputown fulfill the Colonel's needs and desires? What might the destruction of Lilliputown symbolize? What fantasies crumble with Lilliputown, and what alternative dreams does Allard seek after its destruction?
11. Aaron says to his children while telling them the story of the Hemlock family, "Everything changes unless it's written down . . . And even then it changes" (310). How does the Hemlock fairy tale change with each telling? What lessons does Aaron try to teach his children through the story of the Hemlocks?

12. Consider the grave mistakes that Aaron and Allard make over the course of *The Hair of Harold Roux*. In spite of everything, do these dual narrators remain likeable? Why or why not?
13. Discuss the party at Lilliputown, which begins with an innocent swim and ends with a tragic train accident. Why does Boom Maloumian crash the party, and what are the consequences? What does Allard learn about his friends' powers of sympathy when he accidentally removes Harold's hairpiece?
14. Aaron rereads a letter that Maura, whom he calls "Mary" in his novel, sent him years ago (369–370). How does Maura sound in the letter, and how does she compare to Aaron's recreation of her as Mary?
15. Discuss Ann Joslin Williams's afterword, which describes her birth in Iowa and her return to the Iowa Writers' Workshop to start her own writing career. How did Thomas Williams serve as a teacher, mentor, and role model to his daughter? What are some of the important lessons about life and craft that Ann Joslin Williams learned from her father?
16. To celebrate this new publication of *The Hair of Harold Roux*, Andre Dubus III quotes William Faulkner: "The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that a hundred years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life" (xiv). Why might this novel have fallen out of print for so many years, even though it won the National Book Award in 1975? How does the novel read today? Which elements of the novel seem rooted in the 1970s, and which themes are timeless?

### **Suggested reading**

Ann Joslin Williams, *Down from Cascom Mountain*; Andre Dubus III, *Townie*; John Irving, *Last Night in Twisted River*; Andre Dubus, *We Don't Live Here Anymore*; Robert Stone, *Dog Soldiers*; Tim O'Brien, *In the Lake of the Woods*; Frederick Exley, *A Fan's Notes*; Bernard Malamud, *The Assistant*; John Williams, *Stoner*; Jonathan Franzen, *Strong Motion*; Denis Johnson, *Tree of Smoke*

**Thomas Williams** was born in 1926. He attended the University of New Hampshire and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and taught at the University of New Hampshire for many years. His short stories appeared frequently in *Esquire*, the *New Yorker*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and elsewhere. He went on to write seven more novels and a book of short stories. Williams was nominated for the National Book Critics' Circle Award and twice nominated for the National Book Award, winning in 1975.