

## **Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter by Tom Franklin**

### **About the book...**

**In the 1970s, Larry Ott and Silas "32" Jones were boyhood pals in a small town in rural Mississippi. Their worlds were as different as night and day: Larry was the child of lower-middle-class white parents, and Silas, the son of a poor, black single mother. But then Larry took a girl to a drive-in movie and she was never seen or heard from again. He never confessed . . . and was never charged.**

**More than twenty years have passed. Larry lives a solitary, shunned existence, never able to rise above the whispers of suspicion. Silas has become the town constable. And now another girl has disappeared, forcing two men who once called each other "friend" to confront a past they've buried for decades.**

### **About the Author...**

**Tom Franklin was born and raised in Dickinson, Alabama. He held various jobs as a struggling writer living in South**

**Alabama, including working as a heavy-equipment operator in a grit factory, a construction inspector in a chemical plant and a clerk in a hospital morgue. In 1997 he received his MFA from the University of Arkansas. His first book, *Poachers* was named as a Best First Book of Fiction by *Esquire* and Franklin received a 1999 Edgar Award for the title story. Franklin has published two novels: *Hell at the Breech*, published in 2003 and *Smonk* published in 2006. The recipient of the 2001 Guggenheim Fellowship, Franklin now teaches in the University of Mississippi's MFA program and lives in Oxford, Mississippi with his wife, the poet Beth Ann Fennelly, and their children.**

## **Reviews**

### **Publishers Weekly**

**Franklin's third novel (after *Smonk*) is a meandering tale of an unlikely friendship marred by crime and racial strain in smalltown Mississippi. Silas Jones and Larry Ott have known each other since their late 1970s childhood when Silas lived with his mother in a cabin on land**

owned by Larry's father. At school they could barely acknowledge one another, Silas being black and Larry white, but they secretly formed a bond hunting, fishing, and just being boys in the woods. When a girl goes missing after going on a date with Larry, he is permanently marked as dangerous despite the lack of evidence linking him to her disappearance, and the two boys go their separate ways. Twenty-five years later, Silas is the local constable, and when another girl disappears, Larry, an auto mechanic with few customers and fewer friends, is once again a person of interest. The Southern atmosphere is rich, but while this novel has the makings of an engaging crime drama, the languid shifting from present to past, the tedious tangential yarns, and the heavy-handed reveal at the end generate far more fizz than pop.

## **Princeton Book Review**

**There is a great sense of place and exceptional character development in this mystery. Set in Mississippi, it's a story of prejudice and social inequity. Although**

**the central theme is the mystery of what happened to two missing girls, the heart of the book is the inner struggles of the two main characters, Larry Ott and Silas Jones, who shared a childhood friendship and whose lives went in different directions. Both are well developed and it's the strength and humanness of these characters that defines the book. The author brings you full force into their lives, past and present and in doing so also catapults you into rural small town life. The book smoothly moves between the 1970's and present day and with excellent dialog, alternates between the voice of Larry and Silas. In summary, the book is complex and layered and will appeal to those who like character driven novels.**

**This is not only a beautiful story but well written as well. It's poignant and compelling with topics, characters and descriptive detail that beg to be talked about. There are racial issues, moral issues and family and friendship dynamics but the stronger thread is really about the mind set of small towns and the difficulties of overcoming a bad reputation, regardless of its truth. Many**

**of the characters actions and non-action to situations and circumstances will also stay with you.**

## **Discussion Questions**

**1. The epigraph reveals the origins of the novel's title. Why do you think Tom Franklin chose to use "Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter"? What significance does it hold for the story?**

**2. Describe the boys Larry and Silas were, and the men they became. What drew Larry and Silas together as children? What separated them? How did you feel about both characters?**

**3. What elements of Larry's life set him apart from others? Could he have done anything to change people's opinion of him? Would you call Larry a "loser"? What about Silas?**

**4. When Larry is shot at the beginning of the novel, he is sympathetic to his attacker. "Larry felt forgiveness for him because all monsters were misunderstood." Does Larry consider himself to be a monster? Why? Why isn't**

**he bitter? Could you be as charitable if you were in his place? Why does he say all monsters are misunderstood? Do you think he feels the same way at the end of the novel?**

**5. During the attack, the shooter is wearing an old monster mask that Larry recognized. What did that mask symbolize for both the victim and his attacker?**

**6. Tom Franklin goes back and forth between past and present to tell his story. How are Larry and Silas prisoners of their childhoods? How can we break the past's hold on us?**

**7. Describe Larry's relationship with his father, Carl. How might things have been different if Larry knew the truth about his family sooner? Why did Carl force Larry and Silas to fight as boys? What impact did that fight have on their friendship? Do you think the outcome was Carl's intent? How did Silas feel about Carl?**

**8. Talk about both boys' relationships to their mothers. How did their mothers shape them? Were they good sons? What kind of people were their mothers? Why**

**does Silas go to see Larry's mother in the nursing home?**

**9. When Silas visits Mrs. Ott, he's reminded of the past when he first arrived in the town with his mother, both of them coatless in the cold. "Sometimes he thought how Larry's mother had given them coats but not a ride in her car. How what seemed liked kindness could be the opposite." How was this behavior cruel? Can you think of other examples from the book where kindness and cruelty were combined?**

**10. Was Larry treated fairly by the community or the law? We're supposed to be a nation of laws in which people are innocent until proven guilty.**

**11. Why did Silas remain silent when he could have helped Larry when they were teenagers? Why does he finally come forward with the truth? How might both their lives have been different if the truth were known?**

**12. When he was a little boy, Larry's mother used to pray for God to send him a special friend, "one just for him." Were her prayers answered?**

**13. After Silas, Larry considered Wallace Stringfellow to be his friend. What was the bond between Larry and Wallace? What attracted one to the other? Were they really friends? What is a friend?**

**14. As an adult, Larry also prayed to God. "Please forgive my sins, and send me some business. Give Momma a good day tomorrow or take her if it's time. And help Wallace, God. Please." What were Larry's sins? Why did he pray for Wallace? What did Larry see in Wallace?**

**15. When Larry is in the hospital after the shooting, Silas goes to visit. "He wondered how broken Larry was by the events of his life, how damaged." How would you answer Silas?**

**16. Was Larry broken? Was he damaged? What kept him from becoming the monster everyone believed he was? Silas, too, wonders about himself. "What's missing out of you Silas?" Does he discover his missing self? How? Is Silas a better man for the knowledge? How does that insight affect Larry's life?**

**17. Larry felt he was to blame for Wallace's tragic choices. Do you think he**

**was responsible at all? What about Silas? How much responsibility do we carry for others? For family? Friends? Strangers? How much responsibility does the community bear for the Wallace's actions?**

**18. How does Larry react when Silas tells him the truth about their childhood? Can true friends overcome betrayal? How? Do you think they will be part of each other's lives going forward?**

**19. Silas left Southern Mississippi then returned. Larry never left. Why did they make the decisions they did? What was it about their small town that drew and kept them there? How does place shape the novel? Could this have happened in any small town?**

**20. How is racism a part of the story? Use Larry and Silas's experiences to support your response.**

**21. *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter* is also a coming of age story. How did the characters come into themselves as the story progressed? What possibilities might the future hold for Larry and Silas?**

**22. At the novel's end, Tom Franklin writes, "the land had a way of covering the wrongs of people." What does he mean by this?**

**23. What did you take away from reading *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*?**

### **Further Reading**

#### **The Lock Artist by Steve Hamilton**

**Marked by tragedy, traumatized at the age of eight, Michael, now eighteen, is no ordinary young man. Besides not uttering a single word in ten years, he discovers the one thing he can somehow do better than anyone else. Whether it's a locked door without a key, a padlock with no combination, or even an eight-hundred pound safe ... he can open them all.**

**It's an unforgivable talent. A talent that will make young Michael a hot commodity with the wrong people and, whether he likes it or not, push him ever close to a life of crime. Until he finally sees his chance to escape, and with one desperate gamble risks everything to come back home to the only person he ever loved, and to unlock**

**the secret that has kept him silent for so long.**

## **Hell at the Breech by Tom Franklin**

**In 1897, an aspiring politician is mysteriously murdered in the rural area of Alabama known as Mitcham Beat. His outraged friends -- —mostly poor cotton farmers -- form a secret society, Hell-at-the-Breech, to punish the townspeople they believe responsible. The hooded members wage a bloody year-long campaign of terror that culminates in a massacre where the innocent suffer alongside the guilty. Caught in the maelstrom of the Mitcham war are four people: the aging sheriff sympathetic to both sides; the widowed midwife who delivered nearly every member of Hell-at-the-Breech; a ruthless detective who wages his own war against the gang; and a young store clerk who harbors a terrible secret.**

**Based on incidents that occurred a few miles from the author's childhood home, *Hell at the Breech* chronicles the events of**

**dark days that led the people involved to discover their capacity for good, evil, or for both.**