



## Discussion Questions: ***The Night Birds*** by Thomas Maltman

### Soho Press Reading Group Guide

1. *The Night Birds* centers around the Senger family, who live across the river from a small band of Dakota. Famous leaders such as Little Crow or Colonel Sibley are outside the frame. What does the novel gain by focusing on ordinary individuals rather than the names most often seen in history books?
2. The novel alternates between two contrasting time periods, 1876 and 1862. Why did the author choose a dual narrative structure to tell this story? Do the alternating stories echo in any unexpected ways?
3. "I was born in the shadow of the Great Sioux War," Asa tell us in this first line of the story. In what ways do you find his voice compelling? When Hazel begins her story of the family's journey from Missouri the writing switches to a third person perspective. What effect did this have on you as a reader?
4. On page 23 Hazel tells a story of children gathered in a castle where the king has forbidden speech. Why does she tell the story in response to Cassie's question? How does the theme of silence resonate throughout the novel?
5. In a summer of war, Hazel survives by attempting to shed her German-American identity, seeking to become Dakota. Is she successful? How did you respond to her character and the choices she makes?
6. The Rocky Mountain News compared Thomas Maltman to William Kittredge, saying he "shares the same respect for place as the crucible of character." How does place impact the people in *The Night Birds*? Did the narrative transport you into the past?
7. Discuss the title of the novel. What are the night birds? How does their presence become a motif for the story?
8. "The mystic fatalism that suffuses *The Night Birds* comes from both sides of a cultural frontier" Madison Smartt Bell wrote in a Boston Globe review, "and it is often beautifully expressed." Do you agree? How does German and Dakota folklore inform the characters' lives? What are the spiritual dimensions of this story?

9. The Dakota Conflict, once known as The Sioux Uprising, is considered a lost or forgotten episode in national history. How does the novel illuminate history without becoming "teachy?" Did Maltman achieve balance in his portrayal of German and Dakota relations?
10. Did you find the ending satisfying? Why or why not? What scenes or images will linger in your imagination after you put the book away?