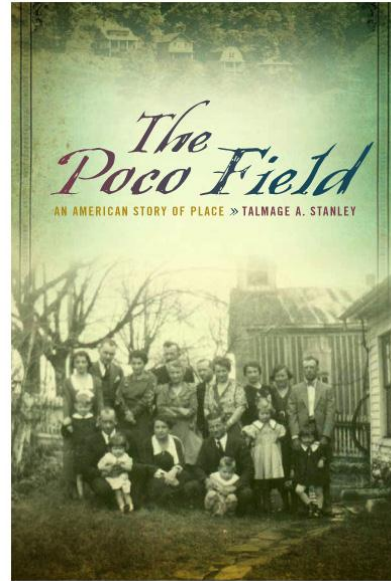


Reading Group Guide

The Poco Field: An American Story of Place

by *Talmage A. Stanley*



About this Guide

The following introduction to *The Poco Field: An American Story of Place*, an author sketch, a list of questions, and discussion starters are provided as resources for individuals and as guides for reading group conversations. Among the aims for *The Poco Field* are to foster a new approach to civic life and citizen education and to create the space for persons to see and understand their own stories in new ways; this resource is offered as one more means toward realizing those aims.

About *The Poco Field*

When Tal Apperson stepped from the train into the coal dust, soot, and noise of Keystone, West Virginia, on a summer afternoon in 1926, he was sixteen years old and had arrived in the place that would define his life and his aspirations. Four years later, with the promise of a job in the company store where Apperson had also found work, Aldah Larew Williams, then twenty-one years old, also arrived in that place. The story of their courtship, marriage, the birth of their daughter, the life they built together in Keystone, is the story of this family's choices, sacrifices, and the costs exacted from them to claim the American Dream. Just fifteen years after their marriage, in order to maintain their hold on that same American Dream, the Appersons moved to Aldah's homeplace of Newbern, Virginia, where their story took a direction no one anticipated or wanted.

The story of his grandparents' lives, Talmage Stanley's *The Poco Field* is rich with the long history of Keystone, Newbern, the ways in which those places shaped the Appersons' choices and assumptions, and how those places have changed over time. Using the Appersons' life and work, Stanley brings us to inhabit the customs and values, the inconsistencies and contradictions of the world of the aspiring middle class in the years after World War II. Stanley crafts a story of an American everyman, a new Willy Lowman, and with it an extended, compelling meditation on what it means to be a citizen of a place.

Tracing the ambivalences and the struggles of ordinary people in ordinary places, Stanley grapples with what it means to be an American and an Appalachian. Interwoven with Tal and Aldah Apperson's story, Stanley uses the stories of citizen activists working and serving in those same places to suggest new ways and new approaches to citizenship that challenge former assumptions and values. Whether it is Keystone or Newbern, or any other place, *The Poco Field* brings readers to know the creative potential of an active engagement with our places to reshape our values and to heal our fractured common life.

Readers come to know Tal and Aldah Apperson, those who have come after them, and these places, in their deep complexity, with their unanswered, unresolved questions. Adhering to Kenneth Burke's precept that the role of stories, of literature, is to provide "equipment for living," *The Poco Field* creates for readers the space for honest thinking and conversation about their own stories and places, to make their own connections and to raise new questions.

About Talmage Stanley

A native of Dublin, Virginia, Talmage Stanley grew up listening to stories of place. As both a student and teacher of American history and culture, Stanley learned to appreciate the ways that those stories and their meanings pointed to larger struggles and questions, suggesting new understandings and insights into what it means to be a citizen. He has written essays and articles focused on citizen education, Appalachian culture and history, and place-based pedagogy. He teaches at Emory & Henry College where he is chair of the Department of Public Policy and Community Service and directs the Appalachian Center for Community Service. He and his family live in Emory, Virginia.

Questions

1. "Place," Stanley suggests, is actually the result of a three-part interaction of the natural environment, the built environment, and human culture and history, an interaction rooted in the "foundations of the earth." What are the implications of this for our understanding of the places in which we reside and for our responsibilities as citizens?
2. *The Poco Field* makes clear that one way of rethinking our citizenship is to consider ourselves as citizens of a place. How might this differ from traditional concepts of citizenship in the American nation?
3. How do Apperson's experiences and Aldah's experiences of place differ? What implications do you see in those differences?
4. Central to *The Poco Field* is the image of Westfield as both a physical neighborhood in the town of Keystone and a larger concept—a way of talking about the American Dream. What makes Westfield what it is? What does Westfield suggest about American culture and society, in the years following World War II? In contemporary America?
5. In telling the stories of the failure of the First National Bank of Keystone, the deterioration of the public schools of McDowell County, and the floods of 2001 and 2002, *The Poco Field* argues that these developments are Westfield and Westfield values magnified and enforced throughout the place. In what ways can you see Westfield active in your own place, among situations and issues about which you are familiar?
6. Billie Cherry represents a particular approach to understanding place and citizenship. Marsha Timpson, Franki Rutherford, Jeff Allen, and Aldah Apperson represent another. How would you describe the difference between these two approaches? In their stories and lives, what represents that difference?

7. Keystone is a place defined in contradictions and conflicts, all of which point to larger issues and questions in the American context. The same can be said of Newbern, particularly as represented by the Great Wagon Road. What are some of the contradictions and conflicts the Great Wagon Road represents in the town of Newbern and in American society, then and now?
8. For Aldah, Newbern became a place of healing and a creative process. What would it mean for place to be a means of bringing people together, of offering a way of healing? How have you seen this in your own places, in your own life?
9. One distinctive element of a citizenship of place is a commitment to working toward the honest response rather than the right answer. What do you understand as the difference between the right answer and the honest response? Are there questions and issues for which there is no right answer and only an honest response? How might this understanding change our political life? What might this understanding make possible?
10. For Aldah, Newbern was an “ark of memory.” What are the implications of a place carrying in its landscape, etched across it, in its “timbres and whispers” the memories of things and people that reside beyond our own living memory? How does this change our responsibility to our places?
11. What is the connection between cooking, memory, and place for Aldah? In what ways do you find this same interplay of taste, place, and memory in your own life? In a world of fast food where families frequently dine out, what might be lost?
12. At several points in the story, the Appersons’ appreciation for the singing of Nat King Cole is mentioned. In what ways does this suggest the cultural and social conflicts and contradictions that bind and limit the Appersons’ Westfield life?
13. Imagine that you are on the train sitting beside the sixteen-year-old Apperson as he travels to the Poco Field for the first time in 1926. What would you say to that young man? Why?
14. Imagine that you are sitting beside Apperson on the train in May 1952, as he makes his way back to Newbern from Cleveland, Ohio. What would you say to him? Why?
15. Throughout *The Poco Field*, Stanley works to use story, imagery, and metaphor to bring to life in accessible ways complex ideas and theories without the use of academic jargon. What ideas and understandings are made more accessible for you through the stories of Apperson and Aldah, Marsha Timpson, Franki Rutherford?
16. Abiding is exemplified in the stories of Aldah, Marsha Timpson, and Franki Rutherford and is central to the practice of a citizenship of place. In what ways does abiding in a place run counter to mainstream American ideas and practices? How might you abide in your place?
17. In the Cadillac showroom, Apperson’s journey to Westfield ends in frustration. What are “the Cadillac showrooms of our lives”? How do you see the Cadillac showrooms lived out in your place?
18. Throughout this book, place is a complexly formed, ongoing social and geologic reality, it is also a measure, a standard by which to evaluate ideas and issues. What is an issue or a question in your place that would have taken a different course if the place were one of the measures used to evaluate and debate it?
19. Franki Rutherford and Jeff Allen suggest their place is a defining source for spirituality and theological understanding. What do you understand the relationship to be between spirituality

and place? In what ways would a closer connection to place reshape or re-focus your own spirituality and theological understandings?

20. *The Poco Field* argues that there is a clear division, according to Westfield membership, in how persons talk of and consider place. Do you see this division in your own life, or among persons you know? What might be the implications of this division? What might be some ways to move beyond it?
21. For a number of persons whose stories are in *The Poco Field*, being Appalachian is a matter of connection, of the strong bonds of relationship. When you think of Appalachia, what comes to mind? What does this regional identifier mean for you?
22. Discuss the places that have shaped who you are. In what ways do you carry those places inside you now?

Discussion Starters

1. Photographs serve a vital function in *The Poco Field*. The idea that there are stories at the edges and in the shadows of those photographs provides energy and force for the story. Ask group members to bring one or two photographs from their family that suggest other stories, or for whom the stories at the edges and in the shadows of the photograph are particularly compelling, or are suggestive of a place. Begin the conversation with persons connecting those photographs, stories, and places.
2. Aldah was a “rememberer.” In real and substantial ways, *The Poco Field* would not have been written were it not for the historical work of someone who did not have much formal education, but who saved letters, clippings, recipes, archival documents, photographs, artifacts, stories. Such work is often unnoticed or dismissed in traditional academic scholarship. Ask someone from your community who does a similar kind of historical and cultural work to attend the group conversation. Begin the conversation with your guest sharing some of the things collected. What can you learn of your place from this person and this work to collect and preserve? In what ways might this person serve as an example of a “rememberer”?
3. Many of the recipes Aldah perfected and saved were for her a way of remembrance, of establishing a connection with her place; cooking was a way to tell a story. Ask group members to bring a recipe that is particularly evocative of a time or place or story. Begin the group session with each person talking about the recipe and the places and stories with which it offers connection. Alternatively, participants can bring a sample of the food for tasting, prompting a conversation about the ways taste evokes the memories of place and people.

For more information on Talmage Stanley, *The Poco Field*, Stanley’s other work, or to sign up for updates and his newsletter, please visit www.talmagestanley.com.

To have Talmage Stanley visit your reading group or call-in for discussion, or to arrange for a reading or presentation, contact tal@talmagestanley.com.

The Poco Field is available from the University of Illinois Press, as well as from local bookstores and online book dealers.

This Reading Group Guide is written and produced by Talmage A. Stanley. Please feel free to copy.