

READING GROUP GUIDE



Dear Reader,

While I'm known as a Minnesota writer, and have spent three decades here, I actually grew up in Missouri, a landscape that shaped me and my vision of human nature greatly. I've long wanted to write about my experiences, but could not have dreamed I'd do so at such a necessary moment. *Nothing More Dangerous* is a story of so many things—love, loneliness, friendship, redemption—but it is my greatest hope that this book joins our necessary conversation about what it means to be prejudiced. As Hoke says in the novel, “It's not a matter of if we have prejudice—we do. It's a matter of understanding those instincts and fighting against them.”

I began writing *Nothing More Dangerous* in 1991, as a short story about a fifteen-year-old boy named Boady Sanden, who grew up in the hills of Missouri in the 1970s. The more time I spent with Boady, the more I came to understand that Boady had a journey to make, one that would mirror my own. You see, I grew up in a place and time where dark notions of us-versus-them roiled behind a thin veneer of respectability. The prejudices that I held in my youth were not the bold strokes that people associate with the Jim Crow era—separate bathrooms and the like—but rather subtle and subconscious notions, so pervasive that folks just took it for granted that one group of people held superiority over another.

I could see even back then that the attitudes of many in our country were changing for the better. But there was always that contingent who paid lip service to change while they cursed the “political correctness” that forced them into the shadows. The arc of history continues to bend toward justice, and I believe that our society will get there, but not

if we continue to ignore those hidden notions that allow us to turn a blind eye toward ourselves.

I left Missouri when I headed north to go to college, eventually earning degrees in both journalism and law. Over the years, I clamored to understand that darker side of my past—the darker side of myself. *Nothing More Dangerous* was born out of that journey. This is a story that took me twenty-eight years to complete, but a lifetime to grasp. This novel is truly the story that I became a writer to tell, and I hope and pray that I have done it justice.

Nothing More Dangerous is a literary mystery and a coming-of-age-story. It is a story of redemption, loss, friendship, and forgiveness. But woven throughout *Nothing More Dangerous* is the journey of a boy struggling to understand and overcome his subconscious prejudices. In the end, I wanted to create a work that would not only entertain, but evoke emotion and contemplation. I want this story to join the conversation about the powerful hold that subconscious prejudices can have on all of us, to help to explain why the spark of old divisions can so easily become a flame when given a touch of oxygen, and to remind all of us that nothing will change unless we ask ourselves the right questions, even when they're tough.

I hope you enjoy it.

Allen Eskens

A CONVERSATION WITH ALLEN ESKENS

What inspired you to write *Nothing More Dangerous*?

Nothing More Dangerous started out in 1991 as a short story about a fifteen-year-old boy named Boady Sanden, a boy who had more to him than what the rest of the world could see. I loved the good-hearted, yet naïve, nature of this character, and I wanted to do more with him than what I had done in the short story. So I expanded his journey, sending him down a path that I had once traveled, one that would teach him the depth and subtlety of racist notions. I wanted him to come to understand how prejudices can lie hidden in all of us, even if, like Boady, we are convinced that we hold no such beliefs. Boady's transformation takes place over a single summer in 1976, where mine was a journey of years.

This was my first story, and it was my desire to write this story better that compelled me to take up the study of writing. I spent the next twenty-eight years studying and rewriting *Nothing More Dangerous* until I felt that it was ready for the rest of the world to read. Now I feel it could not have come together at a more perfect time.

Tell us a bit about your own background. How did you come to be a novelist?

I was a terrible student in high school, but I became involved in theater and that gave birth to a passion that led me to college.



Once there, I found that I had an appetite for learning and switched my major many times, eventually getting degrees in journalism and law. Still, my creative side yearned to be exercised, so after law school, I took up writing as a way to reengage with that creative side. I wrote for my own enjoyment for twenty years before I set out to become a published novelist with my debut novel, *The Life We Bury*.

You're known for writing mysteries and thrillers. Do you see *Nothing More Dangerous* as different from your other books?

I write mysteries and thrillers because as a former criminal defense attorney, I am drawn to crime plots. But in truth, my mystery plots are there to serve as a vehicle to tell a more important story. When I start a novel, I always ask myself, *what is this story really about?* I want to bring my readers into a world of characters and relationships in a way that will hopefully evoke contemplation or stir emotion. My novels deal with themes like guilt, forgiveness, and prejudice, and those facets can be magnified when they are explored in the context of hunting a killer or solving a mystery.

Nothing More Dangerous is my most character-driven novel, and the mystery in it is more of a catalyst than a center post. Fifteen-year-old Boady does not set out to solve the disappearance of Lida Poe, but yet the missing woman becomes an integral part of his world. Placing Boady's awakening against the backdrop of that kind of evil forces Boady to confront his own prejudices in a blunt and honest way.

Many of your novels take place in Minnesota. What was it like to write about Missouri?





Writing about Missouri was a joy. Many of the vignettes in the novel come from my own adventures growing up in the Ozark hills. But much of what I wrote about had to come from my memory because the nearby city has expanded and encroached upon my beloved woods. For example, there is a scene in the book where the boys camp in an old moonshiner's hideout. That spot existed in my youth, but now has a highway built over it. The leaning tree, where Boady goes to find solace, is a tree that I used to climb in the woods near my home. That tree was cut down by developers a decade ago. But in the end, my strong memory of those places was easy to channel as I wrote the book.

What kind of research did you do to write *Nothing More Dangerous*?

There are conversations between Boady and Hoke about race that I wanted to make sure were intellectually honest, so I spent a lot of time studying those issues, adding the intellectual underpinnings to the memories I had growing up in that world. I also spent some time in Columbia so that those scenes were accurate to how the world was in 1976.

Are any of the characters in the novel based on real people?

The characters are all drawn from my imagination. But like Dr. Frankenstein building his monster, I pulled bits and pieces from many places, including from people I've known and from myself. There is one character, however, who is based on a real person. Mrs. Dixon, who only appears in the book as a memory, is based on a neighbor I had growing up in Missouri. She was a woman who lived a graceful and quiet life.



Did anything surprise you in writing this story?

I have to confess that what surprised me the most was that the central message of the novel—the prevalence of subconscious racism—still thrives to the extent it does. I wrote *Nothing More Dangerous* as a way to talk about that quiet racism that comes out in sentences that begin, “I’m not prejudiced, it’s just that . . .”

My favorite novel of all time, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, examined a more overt and intentional form of prejudice, and as a kid, it was easy for me to exempt myself from the lessons of that book. I felt that, because I didn’t believe in segregated schools or separate drinking fountains, I wasn’t a racist. I could wrap myself in the comfort of believing that I held no prejudices, yet in the same breath, I could explain how the color of a man’s skin impacted his ability to be a quarterback.

I wrote *Nothing More Dangerous* with the hope that I might entertain readers with a thrilling and powerful story, while quietly challenging them to question the ease at which people can be divided into us-and-them. I understood that such prejudicial urges exist in all of us, but my great surprise (and disappointment) was how easily those tendencies can again rise to the surface.

Why did you decide to set the novel in the 1970s?

I set the novel in the 1970s and in Missouri because that is a place and time that I am familiar with. More than anything else, I wanted this novel to be honest and authentic. I can speak from first-hand experience about how life was in that part of the world in the 1970s. I didn’t see it then, but that’s the point of the novel. Boady doesn’t see the racism around him and within him because



that is just how things are. It's when he starts to see the world through Thomas's eyes that he can honestly see himself.

Do you think things are different in our nation today? How has this story changed for you over the decades?

At one point in the novel, Hoke tells Boady the story of Emmett Till and he says:

“Boady, the men who beat and murdered those people for all those years, do you think they simply disappeared because someone passed a law? . . . Do you think those folks just figured out that they were wrong and went home?”

“No, but things are different now, ain't they?”

“I wish to God they were, but that stuff still happens. Maybe not in the same way as what happened to Emmett Till, but **it's out there—always will be.**”

I wrote that line in the 1990s, and it seems as though the prescience of that statement has been borne out over the last few years.

As for the story changing, Boady's journey is basically unchanged from what I had first envisioned back in 1991. I could see back then that the attitudes of many in our country were changing for the better. But there was always that contingent who paid lip service to change while they cursed the “political correctness” that forced them into the shadows. The arc of history continues to bend toward justice, and I believe that our society will get there, but not if we continue to ignore those hidden notions that allow us to turn a blind eye toward ourselves. *Nothing More Dangerous* was written to spark that discussion.



What do you hope readers will take from the novel?

Nothing More Dangerous is a story of so many things—love, loneliness, friendship, redemption—but it is my greatest hope that this book will add to our conversation about what it means to be prejudiced. As Hoke says in the novel, “It’s not a matter of if we have prejudice—we do. It’s a matter of understanding those instincts and fighting against them.”

Even good-hearted people, like Boady Sanden, can have blind spots, hidden ideas rooted in judgments tied to the color of a person’s skin. Sometimes, it takes a little nudge for people to ask the right questions of themselves. *Nothing More Dangerous* was written to offer that gentle nudge.



QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Before you read *Nothing More Dangerous*, would you have considered yourself someone with prejudices? Do you feel differently about your own assumptions after reading? What does it mean to be prejudiced?
2. Discuss the setting of the novel—Jessup, Missouri. How does living in Jessup shape the characters? Would Boady be different if he lived somewhere else? How do our communities influence our worldviews?
3. What does Boady think he wants for his future? Do you agree that this is actually what he needs? How are his two desires in opposition? How does Boady try to rationalize this?
4. When you first met Hoke, did you think he was a good or bad guy? Why? Was there a point in the novel at which your opinion changed?
5. How is Boady's world challenged by having the Elgins in his life? How is Boady changed by his friendship with Thomas? Is this friendship different from the friendship Jarvis offers?





6. Discuss how *Nothing More Dangerous* explores racism. Is Boady prejudiced when the novel begins? Does he think he is? How does he come to see Jessup differently?
7. What is the difference between overt racism and prejudice? Is there one? How does Hoke help Boady to see his own prejudice differently? Do you think Hoke's vision of society is right?
8. Have the prejudices of Jessup changed by the end of *Nothing More Dangerous*?
9. Do you think the novel would be different if it was set in 2020 instead of 1976? Why or why not?
10. What does Boady mean when he says "It was as though I had been staring at a mirror all my life and that mirror suddenly turned into a window" (p. 225)?
11. Who is the villain in *Nothing More Dangerous*? Is there one? Do you think this villain would agree they're bad? Why or why not?
12. Hoke recites a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr: "Nothing in all the world is more dangerous than sincere ignorance" (p. 167). What does this quote mean? Why do you think the author chose this quote for this novel's title?





