

Kennedy, W. (1984). *Ironweed*. New York City: Penguin Books.

OVERVIEW

This gripping novel of a hero-turned-hobo-and-alcoholic describes what goes on inside a bum—as Francis Phelan and friends call themselves.

Ironweed won a Pulitzer Prize and was made into a movie and a video. In 1938, Francis Phelan is fifty-eight, living in Albany, New York, and has not seen his wife and family in decades. In killing a scab who was taking his job—and a few others along the way—and especially in dropping his newborn infant to his death, he has learned to run. He runs in anger, in guilt, and in a confusion of rationalizations as to why his life is a shambles.

Phelan is an "ex-ballplayer, part-time grave digger, full-time drunk, who has hit bottom." Neither his buddies nor Helen, his companion of eight or nine years; Katrina, who first taught him about love; Annie, a most faithful and heroic wife; nor any other woman or preacher could lift him from his private pits. But he finds, in company with drifters, a fellowship of despair and cynicism—and in this acceptance is able to express surprising compassion. One time only, he is able to return home for a poignant and hopeful reunion. It is a desperate conversation over his infant's grave, however, that touches Francis most deeply.

He does stay off the booze for a week:

Francis felt healthy and he liked it. It's too bad he didn't feel healthy when he drank. He felt good but not healthy, especially not in the morning, or when he woke up in the middle of the night, say. Sometimes he felt dead. His head, his throat, his stomach: he needed to get them all straight with a drink, or maybe it'd take two, because if he didn't, his brain would overheat trying to fix things and his eyes would blow out. Jeez it's tough when you need that drink and your throat's like an open sore and it's four in the morning and the wine's gone and no place open and you got no money or nobody to bum from, even if there was a place open. That's tough, pal. Tough. (p. 8)

In this novel, readers do not just live with drunks and feel the effects of alcoholism, they get inside the workings of minds they have often longed to help.

'Jesus,' the preacher and his shirt-sleeved loyalists sang, 'the name that charms our fears, that bids our sorrows cease, 'Tis music in the sinners ears, 'Tis life and health and peace...He breaks the power of canceled sin...His blood can make the foulest clean, His blood availed for me.'

Well not me, Francis said to his unavailed-for self, and he smelled his own uncanceled stink again, aware that it had intensified since morning.

Helen...held no hymnal as the others did, but sat with arms folded in defiant resistance to the possibility of redemption by any Methodist like Chester; for Helen was a Catholic. And any redemption that came her way had better be through her church, the true church, the only church. (p. 33)

Later, running again

Francis was now certain only that he could never arrive at any conclusions about himself that had their origin in reason. But neither did he believe himself incapable of thought. He believed he was a creature of unknown and unknowable qualities, a man in whom there would never be an equanimity of both impulsive and premeditated action. Yet after every admission that he was a lost and distorted soul, Francis asserted his own private wisdom and purpose: he had fled the folks because he was too profane a being to live among them...What he was, yes, a warrior, protecting a belief that no man could ever articulate, especially himself...a warrior, he was certain he was not a victim. Never a victim.

In the deepest part of himself that could draw an unutterable conclusion, he told himself: My guilt is all that I have left. If I lose it, I have stood for nothing, done nothing, been nothing. (p. 216)

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Have you met or known any persons like Francis and the drifters in this book?
2. What similarities and differences are there between men and women of the streets and hobo camps—the causes for their being there, the effect this life has upon them and their relationships, and how they relate with those around them and people of the straight world?
3. Consider especially the nature of human guilt "treasured" by so many of us. Beyond simplistic spiritual solutions, what can be done about nagging and deep-seated guilt?
4. Do you think Francis Phelan could ever go home? What made it so difficult for him to stop running and return to Annie and his family?
5. How can those who retreat to the fringes of society be reached and helped most effectively?

IMPLICATIONS

1. There are reclusive upper- and middle-class alcoholics, working class drunks, and those on the streets and rails called bums. Novels such as this one help us to understand the difficulties in helping, and the importance of avoiding, such a life.
2. Young people learn, and have their characters shaped, by what they read, see, and hear in media. Discussion of a book like this (its video or even this review) can help them shape their own responses to discouragement and tragedy. It can also develop an empathy for those who are "down on luck" and in despair.
3. Often life's deepest hurts and guilt are most precious to those who have not found its greatest treasure. Letting go precedes the lifting up of one's fallen soul. Alcoholics Anonymous found this truth through pragmatic experience in helping.

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