

True Religion
By J.L. Weinberg

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *True Religion*, a novel about the religious awakening of Seth Davis after an encounter with a ghost. J.L. Weinberg's debut novel is a genre-bending fusion of paranormal horror, American history, and New Age enlightenment.

About This Book

Précis: An encounter with a spirit at a holiday party in Pennsylvania's Orenda Valley sends Seth Davis, a gay journalist from Manhattan, on a profound religious journey. Along the way, Seth stumbles into a quarreling coven of witches in the tourist town of Hope Springs, one of the most haunted destinations in America. As Seth learns more of the town's history, he also uncovers his own past, and in order to seek peace for his soul, he must determine the fate of the coven, the town, and the entire Orenda Valley.

In July, 1988, Seth Davis is invited to an Independence Day party in the Orenda Valley by his friend, Richard Abbey, a former 1960s radical who is fighting the construction of the Starfire nuclear power plant. Martin Spencer, Seth's screenwriter lover, who secretly practices magic, also comes along. Both that night, and on a later visit to the home of Beth and Roger Prince, the party's hosts, Seth encounters a murderous ghost. This contact has a monumental impact—Seth reconnects with Ajax, the ghost of his past-life father, Ambrose Pennington. While in the valley, Seth also meets his birth mother, Raven Grimmsley, high priestess of the local Circle of Light coven.

As Seth tries to protect himself from the supernatural, struggling to find a belief in God, Raven enlists the help of coven member Ivy McBroom to determine if Seth is the child she gave up for adoption. In financial ruin, Raven is determined that Seth will not inherit the family land on which the Starfire plant will be built. The coven holds a sabbat where Raven conjures a death spell against Seth.

Trying to fend off both the spell and repeated visits from Ajax, Seth researches the paranormal and enlists Ivy's advice on counter-spells. He decides to be past-life regressed to discover the source of his conflict with Ajax. In an effort to contact Ajax, he returns to Hope Springs with Martin and psychic James Pyre to take the town's ghost tour. Martin is killed by Ajax, prompting Seth to send his lover's soul into the Light.

Working through his grief, Seth decides to return to Hope Springs to confront Ajax and Raven, who he now knows conclusively is his birth mother. At Ajax's request, Seth and Pyre send the spirit back to the Light. In the aftermath, Seth has a vision that allows him to devise a new, True Religion that will bring mankind into the New Age.

For Discussion (*All page and chapter numbers refer to the paperback edition.*)

1. *True Religion* moves between Manhattan and the fictional Orenda Valley, which straddles New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Why does the author mix real and fictional locations? Do you have a sense of where the real Hope Springs, PA is? Is it possible for a town to be inundated with spirits?

2. Richard Abbey invites Seth to Hope Springs for a July Fourth party, setting the plot in motion. How does Richard's environmental and anti-nuke activism influence Seth's thinking, particularly around an Earth-based spirituality?
3. The author sets the novel in a long-settled part of the United States, with links to the Revolutionary War and the growth of commerce. What connections are drawn between the annexation of native lands, the mining of natural resources, and the growth of the United States as a mercantile power? How does this aspect tie into Seth's ecological thinking?
4. From the start, Seth's relationship with his partner, Martin, is in trouble. Discuss the interaction between the two men and why they are heading in different directions. What are the changes in Martin's character that occur as the story progresses? Are these changes believable? Is the dissolution of Seth and Martin's relationship sad or inevitable?
5. Who is the radiant boy (page 68), and what role does this mythical figure play in the story?
6. Did you find Seth's second encounter with Ajax (Chapter 6), where Ajax tries to suffocate him, terrifying? Is such an event possible, or could it be dismissed as a nightmare?
7. Why does Seth's interaction with Ajax scare him to the point of seeking God? Does Seth search for God out of desperation, or is his ghostly encounter akin to a near-death experience from which he returns completely transformed?
8. When Seth's life is in danger, his intuition leads him to call upon Jesus for salvation. Is it odd that a Jewish character would reach out to Jesus?
9. Discuss the evolution of Seth's burgeoning religious beliefs, in particular "All the Gods are One" (page 161). Is this evolution believable?
10. Seth's guide, Keta, a type of guardian angel, offers Seth spiritual teachings. Do guardian angels exist, and if so, have you encountered yours?
11. The book weaves together several religious beliefs—Christian, Celtic, Egyptian, and Native American. What do you think the author intended by doing this? How does the prayer at the end of the novel (page 341) synthesize this belief system?
12. The plot is advanced, and spiritual information is given, through Seth's dreams. Can hidden knowledge be transferred into the material world through dreams and then influence human action?
13. Ajax, along with the netherworld he inhabits, is described in detail, giving the spirit world a forceful validity. Do you believe in spirits? Is your notion of spirit beings similar to the author's?
14. The Circle of Light coven, led by Raven Grimmsley, plays a role in Seth's occult education. Why does the author describe the beliefs of Europe's Old Religion in such detail? How do these beliefs differ from the stereotypical views of witches and witchcraft?
15. Is Raven Grimmsley a sympathetic character, or is she undone by resorting to black magic?

16. Discuss the book's attitude toward the practice of magic, including black magic.
17. What is the significance of crystals, both in magic and in the narrative?
18. What is the symbolism of the Orenda River? Does the flowing of the river to the sea represent the life cycle? What else does water represent in the novel?
19. Seth is an adopted child who doesn't know his origins. Can the foundling be viewed as a literary figure who is outside society, and therefore able to see things others do not? Does this description apply to Seth? Seth finds his birth mother in Raven Grimmsley, and his past-life father in Ajax. Is there another "father" that Seth finds?
20. Native American culture is referenced throughout the novel, particularly in the guise of Chief Ferry. What cultural traits does the author highlight, and are these positive or negative? How are Chief Ferry and Seth related across lifetimes?
21. Seth is past-life regressed to learn his connection to Ajax. Do you think it is possible to connect to past lives through hypnosis? Why or why not?
22. The father/son sexual abuse that is revealed in Seth's past life as Samuel Pennington at the hands of his father, Ambrose, is taboo and troubling. How did you react to this aspect of the story? Did you find it believable? Did you find it disturbing?
23. Sex and religious ecstasy are equated in the book. When Martin drugs Seth and casts a spell for prosperity (pages 261-263), how does the sex between Seth and Martin heighten the magic? Can sexual acts make magic more effective?
24. Discuss psychic James Pyre's role. Is he mentor to Seth? A father figure? Do you accept the idea that people can see and communicate with unseen phenomena? Are ESP and telepathy possible?
25. What role does Ivy McBroom play, both as Seth's occult mentor and as a driver of the plot? Do you think Ivy's motives are good, bad, or somewhere in-between?
26. What is the connection between the Sixties' counterculture, the Eighties' Yuppie culture, and the New Age movement in the novel? Where does leading an open gay life fit into these movements?
27. "True Religion" refers to a new religion of Seth's device, based upon the revelations he receives. Discuss the tenets of the True Religion and how they might help save planet Earth.
28. Is the premise set up in the book's *Prologue*—to reveal the workings of karma and reincarnation—fulfilled by the end of the novel? Do you believe in karma and reincarnation?
29. Over the course of the book, can a case be made that Seth has lost touch with reality and has, in a sense, gone mad? Is there a connection between dawning spiritual awareness and insanity?

Suggested Reading

The Complete Art of Witchcraft, Sybil Leek; *Telepathy*, Sybil Leek; *Drawing Down the Moon*, Margot Adler; *Initiation*, Elisabeth Haich; *The Notorious Doctor August*, Christopher Bram; *The Vampire*

Lestat, Anne Rice; *Dune*, Frank Herbert; *Young Goodman Brown*, Nathaniel Hawthorne; *The Children's Book*, A.S. Byatt; *Rosemary's Baby*, Ira Levin; *The Bell*, Iris Murdoch; *The White Hotel*, D.M. Thomas; *The Haunting of Hill House*, Shirley Jackson; *The Basic Writings of C.G. Jung*.

J.L. Weinberg was born and raised in San Francisco. He moved to New York City to become a film critic, but was sidetracked by stints as a model and actor. He returned to movie journalism, writing for *New York*, *Premiere*, *The Village Voice*, *Interview*, *American Cinematographer*, *The Advocate*, and *The New York Native*. *True Religion* is his first novel.