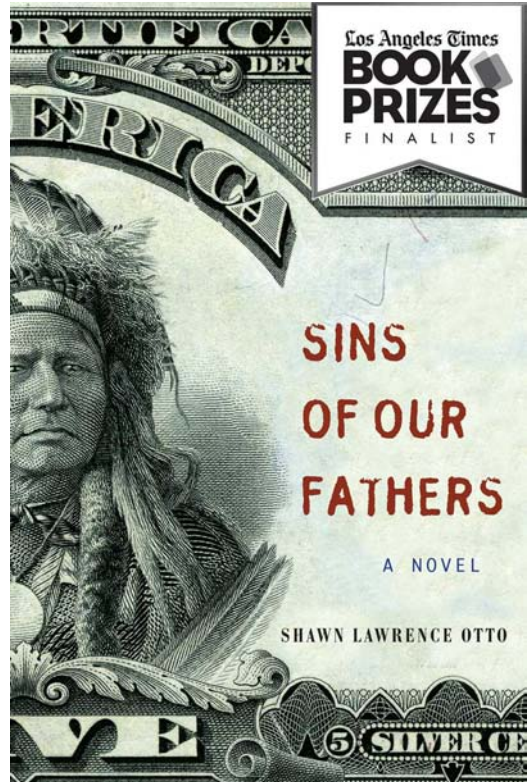


Sins of Our Fathers

A NOVEL

READERS GUIDE

Thank you for reading *Sins of Our Fathers* by Shawn Lawrence Otto. This ambitious novel explores themes about race, money and the American Dream, and we hope this discussion guide will be useful in exploring these and other topics in greater depth in your book club or discussion group.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. JW's clothing changes considerably throughout the novel. What does this symbolize?
2. What do you think the title of the book represents?
3. In one sense, every novel is a crime novel. *Sins of Our Fathers* contains both crimes against the law and crimes against conscience. Which are which, and what makes the crimes that are not illegal, still crimes?
4. Discuss the role of horse training and horsemanship in the lives of the three main characters, and what it means in the story.
5. JW and Johnny Eagle have in many ways led similar lives. Can you list all the similarities in their experiences and identities? What does this mean?
6. What are some of the ways the novel plays with common clichés about Native people?
7. One of the major themes of the novel is the legacy of institutional racism that flows just below the surface of modern society. Is this an exaggeration? What are some of the covert examples of racism that the novel explores? What do you think we need to do to as both Native and non-native people to get past racism?

Sins of Our Fathers

A NOVEL

READERS GUIDE

8. Two of the major themes of the novel explore the ways that US law structurally deprives Native people of access to economic opportunity and criminal justice. Discuss how the Tribal Law and Order Act and the Violence Against Women Act are two attempts to address this problem, and whether they are succeeding.
9. One of the effects of federal trust ownership of Native lands is that banks often will avoid mortgage lending on reservations, depriving Native people of the major engine for wealth-building among the middle class: a home mortgage. Another effect is that, unlike states and counties, tribal governments cannot levy property taxes to fund government operations. What impact, if any, do you think this situation had on the members of the North lake Band of Ojibwe?
10. Discuss the ways that rape plays out in the lives of the characters in the story.
11. What does the term “apple” mean, and why is it insulting?
12. A common argument in discussions about race is that Native people should assimilate, like other ethnic minorities. What are the factors that make the situation more complicated than that when it comes to Native people?
13. Discuss the role of risk and gambling in the story.
14. In the end, JW goes to prison for a crime he did not commit. Is this justice?
15. The novel explores the relationship between prejudice, justice and empathy. How do both JW’s and Johnny Eagle’s understanding of these qualities evolve over the course of the story?
16. What does Jacob represent to JW, and why?
17. If you had to lead a discussion of this book among high school students, what would you tell them about why the issues in the book are still alive today?
18. What is JW trying to do when he takes Julie to the quarry?
19. Is Carol a sympathetic character? Why or why not?
20. What things attract Mona and JW to each other?

Sins of Our Fathers

A NOVEL

READERS GUIDE

21. One of the core clues in the novel is the Chief Onepapa bill. What does this represent?
22. Search for Chief Onepapa on the Internet. What is famously wrong with the bill, and what if anything does that say about the federal government's relationship to Native people?
23. This novel was written by a non-Native. Does he have the right to tell this story? What should writers writing across culture or gender identities on politically sensitive topics keep in mind? Did the writer succeed? Why or why not?
24. The novel has been described as being about race, money, and the American Dream. What is the American Dream, and how does the novel explore that?

HELP SPREAD THE WORD

Thank you for reading Sins of Our Fathers.

If you enjoyed the book and feel its themes are important, please recommend it to your book club, your child's English teacher, your local radio station, your local independent bookstore, and rate and review it on Goodreads.

Shawn Lawrence Otto is available to visit book clubs via video chat, or as a keynote speaker at events worldwide. You can reach him via his Website at shawnotto.com.

Sins of Our Fathers

A NOVEL

READERS GUIDE



Interview:

Four Questions for...Author Shawn Lawrence Otto

By Claire Kirch

The champagne corks must have been flying at Shawn Lawrence Otto's home, near the St. Croix River, earlier this month. On November 4, Otto's wife, Rebecca, was re-elected Minnesota's state auditor after a bruising political campaign. A week later, Otto's debut novel, *Sins of Our Fathers* (Milkweed Editions), starred by *PW*, had its Minneapolis launch party. We talked to the author--and sometime screenwriter (he wrote the film adaptation of *House of Sand and Fog*)--about his new novel, managing his wife's campaign and the American Dream.

Your publisher, Milkweed Editions, touts this novel as an exploration of race, money, and the American Dream. What do you want your readers to understand about these things?

The American Dream has always been about equal access to opportunity. Race has been a part of this discussion since the beginning, playing out in battles over economics and opportunity—who has access to capital, who can vote. These are the fundamental things we wind up fighting over. American Indians are denied in law the same level of access to justice and economic opportunity afforded other Americans, because of the unique way Congress and the Supreme Court have treated them. What does that mean, and what would happen when someone like that tried to push back against those limitations, to grab a bigger piece of the American Dream? That's what this novel explores.

Where does your knowledge, and interest, in this subject come from?

My mother is an immigrant, so I have always been aware of this question of what it means to be an American, and the privileges of being on the inside, and what it is like to be just

Sins of Our Fathers

A NOVEL

READERS GUIDE

outside of that and wanting to get in. With *Sins of Our Fathers*, I started out by wanting to write a movie to shoot in my home state of Minnesota, and I'd tried various ideas. My wife showed me an article in the *Fed Gazette* about how and why many banks avoid lending on Indian reservations. American Indians very much fill the role of perpetual immigrants in America—not quite sovereign, not quite citizens in terms of the rights and opportunities they are afforded. Because of the way Congress and the Supreme Court have structured reservations, banks often avoid lending there and it is very difficult to get a mortgage, which is the main engine of economic growth in the middle class. On the justice side, Tribal courts cannot prosecute white people for crimes they commit on a reservation. As a result, crime tends to be much higher there. We say it's the alcohol or it's inter-generational poverty or that Natives just can't get their shit together, when we've structurally taken away many of the tools for them to do so. We need to find a way to bend the arc of justice wider. You don't have to be an Indian to care about that. It's the American Dream.

*You've published a nonfiction book, **Fool Me Twice: Fighting the Assault on Science in America**, which won a Minnesota Book Award. Nonetheless, you've also written for film and television. Why tell this story in a novel instead of, say, a screenplay?*

I did start out writing *Sins* as a film, but as a screenwriter I've always sort of envied novelists the art that the form allows in terms of the beauty of writing and the ability to move people in a much more intimate way. Screenwriting places much of the art in the economical movement of emotion through the drama. I love that form, leading with the actions the characters take, which is why you hear directors shout "Action!" In a novel you have an opportunity to retain that, but you also have much more time to explore the nuances of ideas and themes, and the beauty of language and how that informs our understanding of our lives and our purpose. In thinking about shooting this film, I went to do some location scouting on various reservations and the more I learned the more opportunity I saw coming from a novelistic approach to get into a lot of really beautiful things while maintaining a thriller's edge.

*Your wife, Rebecca Otto, was re-elected as Minnesota's state auditor a week before **Sins of Our Fathers** was officially released. You managed her campaign. What was that like, promoting a novel about predatory financial practices while so immersed in the campaign for a state auditor?*

Running Rebecca's campaign while doing the last rewrites of the novel was a bit like painting a watercolor while battling five ninjas. You are all about numbers and messaging and strategy and the full-contact sort of combat of the political arena; it's hard to do that while also accessing the creative space you need to inhabit your characters and be an

Sins of Our Fathers

A NOVEL

READERS GUIDE

effective writer of fiction. It got worse this last summer when we found ourselves the target of a sort of predatory attack of our own. An extremely wealthy man with political ambitions to become governor saw the state auditor's role as a good stepping stone for that. So he decided to take her on in a primary. He ran an extraordinarily aggressive and unethical campaign, outspending us by four or five to one, smearing her with lies almost daily. We framed the race as being about love versus money, which was in some ways what the novel was about as well. I remember making last passes through the pages early in the mornings before the news cycle started and then diving back into the campaign. But it was really tough to make that mental transition, and to guard some small portion of my creative space from the ongoing fury of the battle. In the end, we beat him by four to one, and the novel got done by deadline, so I guess it worked out okay.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shawn Lawrence Otto is a screenwriter, novelist and science advocate. In film, he wrote and coproduced the movie *House of Sand and Fog*, which was nominated for three Oscars. His novel *Sins of Our Fathers* was a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. He is also an international science advocate. He is the cofounder of the US Presidential Science Debates, for which he received the IEEE-USA's National Distinguished Public Service Award, and he has advised science debate efforts in several countries. Based on these experiences, he is author of *Fool Me Twice: Fighting the Assault on Science in America*, which won the 2012 Minnesota Book Award. He was the keynote speaker at the 2009 Nobel conference. Shawn designed the Ottos' wind-powered, passive solar, geothermal home, and he and his wife Rebecca Otto, the 18th Minnesota State Auditor, built it with their own hands. The home has been featured in local and national publications and toured by thousands of people as an example of green building.

