

# THE ENTIRE SKY

## Book Club Kit

"Joe Wilkins is a writer of great power and heart."

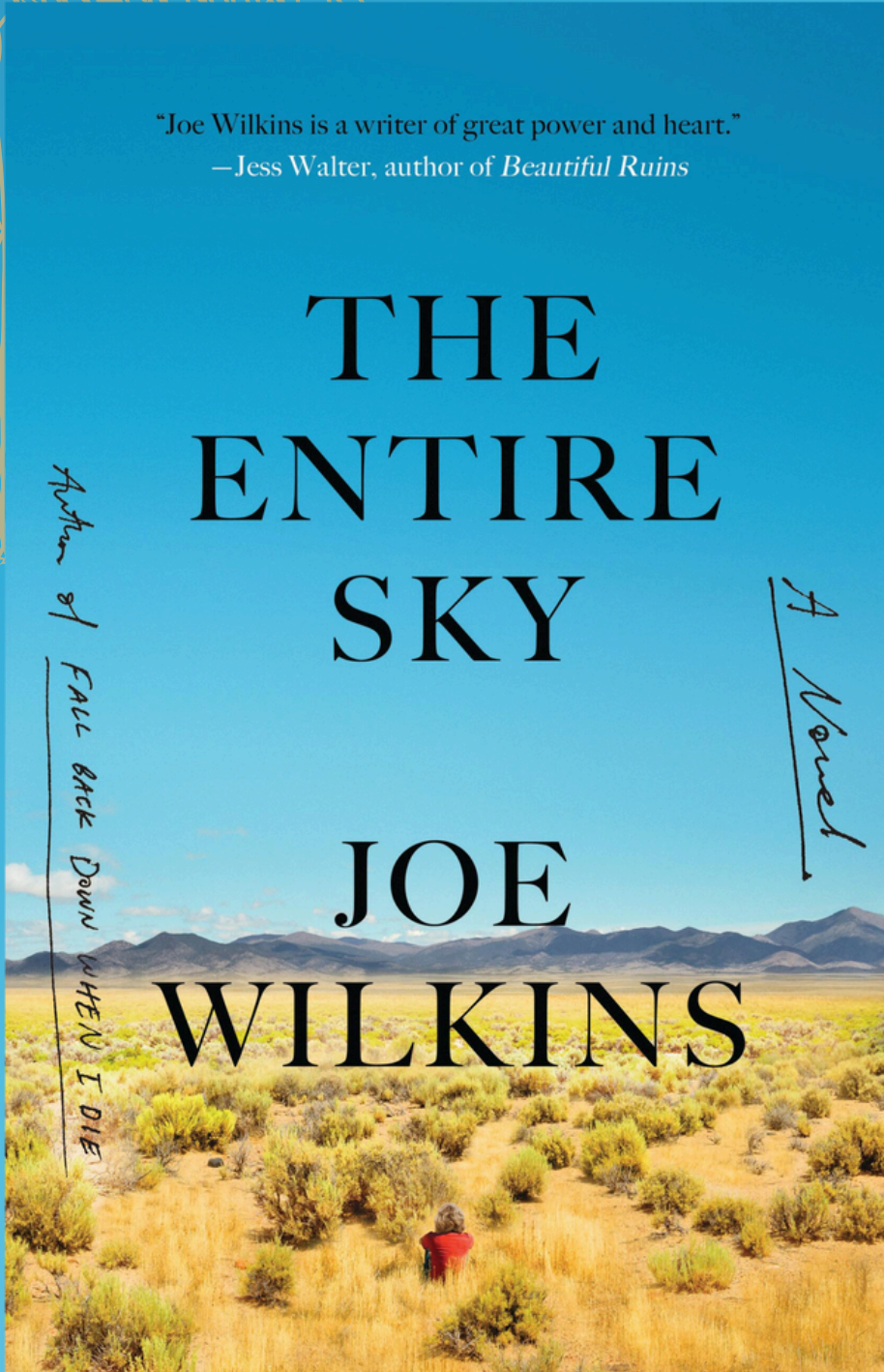
—Jess Walter, author of *Beautiful Ruins*

# THE ENTIRE SKY

# JOE WILKINS

Author of *FALL BACK DOWN WHEN I DIE*

A Novel



# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Each of the three main characters—Justin, Rene, and Lianne—have, in some ways, run away. What are they running from? What personal, social, economic, and other forces are pushing on each of them? Is running away sometimes a reasonable answer? When? And why? What does it accomplish for each of these characters?
2. In what ways does the novel’s structure—moving back and forth in time between April 1994 and *Before*—influence the story and your perceptions of the characters? Must we know and understand the past to move forward? Or are there times we ought to forget? Where do you see remembering and forgetting in the novel?
3. Poverty, abandonment, abuse—Justin has had to deal with far more than any young person ever should have to deal with, yet he remains, for the most part, decent to others and even happy and hopeful. What does he draw on to keep going, even in the face of so much horror? What allows him to be so resilient?
4. In many ways, Rene is an admirable man. Yet internally he feels intense regret and shame. Why? What personal and cultural struggles is he grappling with? And how does Justin’s presence bring a force to bear on those struggles?
5. More is expected of Lianne than her brothers, Keith and Dennis. Why? Where in the novel does Lianne throw off expectation? What does she choose for herself?
6. How does the myth of the cowboy affect the entire community of Delphia? What other myths, for good and ill, are working on each of the characters? Where are the characters able to step outside the usual mythologies?
7. Discuss the role of family in *The Entire Sky*. Where do families work and not work? What makes a family? Did you find any similarities to your own family?
8. In an early review, the novelist Sharma Shields wrote: “In these pages a different potential for manhood is turned over and examined, one that allows for gentleness, healing, acceptance, grace.” How does the novel interrogate masculinity? How does it explore gender and sexuality? Does it come to any conclusions?
9. What is the role of music in *The Entire Sky*? Do you find music playing a similar role in your life?
10. Discuss the final chapters. What does this ending have to say about each of the characters? What does it have to say about remembering, forgetting, tradition, family, gender, and resilience?

# THE ENTIRE SKY PLAYLIST

Scan to listen on Spotify



## *Come as You Are* - Nirvana

I was born and raised on a sheep ranch on the high plains of eastern Montana. Our dusty black radio sat atop the refrigerator, the silver antenna flagged with tinfoil for better reception. Still, we only got two television stations and couldn't haul in that many AM and FM signals either. Some Christian stations, classic country, contemporary country, and a couple of stations that cycled through the top 40 hits. I tried it all on as a boy, and though I loved music—loved nothing more than to punch a tape into the *JC Penney's* stereo I'd saved for and lie back on my bed and listen for hours—none of the music I heard on the radio quite fit. I was bookish, earnest, and dreamy. I was fourteen when I first heard Pearl Jam's *Ten*. It's not that I felt like I'd found something; rather, I felt like I'd been found.

Pearl Jam led, of course, to Nirvana, the source of it all. And then not so many years later, the summer I was sixteen, I met a boy from Seattle. We worked together at the county school. It almost didn't seem possible, that he was from where the music was from—and that he was here, right now, sitting next to me on our lunch break out back of the school, strumming a beat-up acoustic, singing “Come As You Are” under that heartbreak-blue Montana sky. His ratty blond hair hung below his chin, his jeans were worn to threads at the knees and his flannels were always untucked. I'd never met a boy who had earrings in both ears before. At first, I didn't know what to think, but he was fun and kind and a hard worker. We became friends, we told each other stories. My dad had died some years before, and my mom struggled to make ends meet on a part-time schoolteacher's salary. He couldn't remember his dad at all, and the last time he'd seen his mom was from a bus window. He was staying that summer with a shirttail relation out in the Bull Mountains, though in August, that situation somehow fell apart. One Monday, he just didn't show up for work. He was gone, taking the music with him.

I think about him often, I've even written about him before, my friend, Justin, but in the early months of the pandemic, when we were all so far from one another, he came back to me again—vividly, insistently. I began to write a young man, guitar in hand, on the run in Montana. I wanted, badly, for this lost boy I was writing, this other Justin (I even borrowed my friend's name), to be found.

“Come as you are,” Cobain sings, and what if, when we were young, some older someone, no matter how we wore our hair, no matter what or who we loved, invited us in and listened to us, accepted us, offered instruction? What if this someone tried to find us, even when we were lost to ourselves? I was lucky. My mother did that for me, so did my grandfather.

*The Entire Sky* rises out of my long ago friend's vivid presence and sudden absence, out of Nirvana's astonishing song, out of these questions, which, in the writing, became wishes.

# PLAYLIST

## *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* - Mississippi John Hurt

There's another runaway in *The Entire Sky*, and that's Rene Bouchard, an elderly rancher who's recently lost his wife of many years. In the wake of her passing, he's escaped the family's house in the outpost town of Delphia, Montana, and taken off for his dryland sheep ranch to the north. He's too old to be out there alone, and he knows his grown children are scheming to sell the place out from under him. The years haven't brought what they once seemed to promise, and Rene is grieving many things, the circle of family and land and good work he thought he'd built crumbling around him.

Most folks are familiar with A.P. Carter's rewriting of the old hymn, "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," and everyone from Mavis Staples to the Punch Brothers to—I kid you not—U.S. Senator Robert Byrd has covered Carter's version. Yet the original hymn offers no answers; there's no promise of "a better home a-waiting / [i]n the sky." Rather, the original ends instead with this stark sequence and one final question:

One by one their seats were emptied.  
 One by one they went away.  
 Now the family is parted.  
 Will it be complete one day?

Though Mississippi John Hurt is singing Carter's lyrics, his feel for the song, that worry and waver in his voice, that slow picking, reminds me of the brutal honesty of the original hymn. And that, I think, is the version in Rene Bouchard's mind when he pulls out his harmonica and blows a few of his old cowboy tunes.

## *Passionate Kisses* - Mary Chapin Carpenter

The final primary character in *The Entire Sky* is Lianne Parker, Rene's oldest child, the one he has often—perhaps too often—depended on. When her mother takes a turn for the worse, Lianne leaves her own family in Spokane to come home and help. And now, her mother dead, her father run off, Lianne looks up and finds herself in the middle of her life right back where she started, in the dusty little town of Delphia. She's wondering which way to go, wondering if she's settled for too little, wondering if—and how—she might ask for more.

Though the title of Lucinda Williams's song suggests a different kind of tune altogether (in grad school, whenever I turned in a poem for workshop, a friend would cross out the title I had landed on and write, "Passionate Kisses"), this is truly one of the sharpest, smartest songs about grown-up desire I know. Mary Chapin Carpenter turned "Passionate Kisses" into a hit in the early '90s, and I'm betting Lianne Parker has caught it on the radio; I know she has many times sung these very questions to herself:

Do I want too much?  
 Am I going overboard to want that touch?  
 I'll shout it out to the night  
 "Give me what I deserve 'cause it's my right"

# PLAYLIST

## *Born in the USA* - Bruce Springsteen

Early on in the novel, not long after we first encounter Justin on the run, he gets a ride from a couple of fishermen. They're loud, confident guys, celebrating a day on the river with a few beers on the road home, and, too, despite their brashness, they're decent people. They try to do the right thing by this skinny, long-haired kid they've picked up on the road, even if they don't exactly know what that is, even if Justin is too terrified and fucked up and frantic to trust them. The fishermen see Justin's guitar and figure he likes music and so pop Springsteen into the tape deck. They all listen then to the Boss. And no one sings more honestly about the contradictions of what it might mean to do the right thing by another human being, what it might cost or ask of us, than Springsteen.

## *About a Girl* - Nirvana

The forward movement of *The Entire Sky* takes place across a number of days in mid-April 1994, just after Kurt Cobain's suicide. In another thread of the novel though, in sections titled "Before," we delve back into Justin's, Rene's, and Lianne's worlds and uncover the struggles and sadnesses they're all carrying, as well as those few brilliant moments of hope and light. One Saturday morning, alone in the apartment he shares for a time with his mother, eleven-year-old Justin hears Nirvana on the radio, one of their early singles. Nothing for him is ever the same again.

## *Shelter from the Storm* - Bob Dylan

One of the characters we meet in those "Before" sections, a character whose presence and subsequent absence bring a massive force to bear on the forward movement of the novel, is Rene's youngest child and Lianne's littlest brother, Franklin. Franklin isn't much help on the ranch and doesn't take to sports, like his brothers; he doesn't really fit in at all with the other rough-and-tumble boys in town, and so for many years his closest friend is his sister. They write letters. Lianne sends him music recommendations. It's the mid-70s, and I'm sure she would have told him about Dylan's *Blood on the Tracks* album. I'm betting "Shelter from the Storm" would have been Franklin's favorite. A sensitive boy in a hard world, Franklin—like Justin, like so many boys growing up in the far places, where the rules about what it means to be a boy, and then a man, are hard and fast—could have used more than a little shelter.

## *Should've Been a Cowboy* - Toby Keith

Toby Keith's debut single "Should've Been a Cowboy" hit number one on the country charts in 1993, and just about any time we drove out into the hills for a bonfire party, someone would throw open the door of their pickup and crank this one up loud. And here's the thing, I like the song. It's got fun lines and catchy rhymes throughout; the melody is pure, lovely country; and the chorus—we all have our should haves—hits me just below the heart.



# PLAYLIST

## *Should've Been a Cowboy* - Toby Keith (cont'd)

That said, the cowboy myth looms large here, and even if the worst, most destructive parts of that myth are left unsung, you can sort of sense them trembling at the edges of the lyrics. Justin, Franklin, the boy I used to be (even at those bonfire parties)—we didn't fit the cowboy myth. There are admirable versions of men who, at least in part, do. My grandfather was one. Rene Bouchard is another. Yet by the end of the novel Rene comes up hard against the many failures of that myth. In an early review, the award-winning Sharma Shields writes,

“Joe Wilkins's *The Entire Sky* exposes with strength and poetry the unjust pain of toxic masculinity and the profound damage it wages on children. In these pages a different potential for manhood is turned over and examined, one that allows for gentleness, healing, acceptance, grace. Wilkins gives an exquisite depth to the Montana landscape and to his characters—this is a textured, bloody, and breathtaking book.”

I'm so thankful for her wise, insightful reading, so thankful she heard the notes ringing beneath.

## *Elderly Woman Behind the Counter in a Small Town* - Pearl Jam

### *Looking for a Way Out* - Uncle Tupelo

These two are mostly for me. Though as a teenager I might not have had the words to explain why I listened to it on repeat, “Elderly Woman Behind the Counter in a Small Town” was, I can see now, one of the first works of art I encountered that treated small towns and rural people with what felt like honesty and dignity. There's no easy, received notions here, no mythologizing or belittling; there's only two people encountering each other across time and distance. I loved this song; I still love it.

I remember first hearing Uncle Tupelo in my twenties and being totally pissed off. Someone was making this kind of music when I was a young person, when I could have used it most—and I didn't know about it? I'm still blown away by their albums, and this song in particular, which, though this entry is for me, could be speaking about almost any of the characters in *The Entire Sky*:

When you find you can't somehow  
 Make it like all the rest  
 You won't need to scrounge around for someone else  
 Torn between the unknown  
 And the place that you call home  
 And the life you want but have never known

# PLAYLIST

## *All Apologies* - Nirvana

*The Entire Sky* opens with an epigraph from “All Apologies,” which is, I think, one of the best rock songs ever recorded; both the *In Utero* and the *MTV Unplugged* versions are masterpieces. “What else should I be?” Cobain sings, his voice resigned but still somehow nearly breaking open, the music gathering itself underneath that voice, biding its time. Let’s try, as best we can, to be ourselves; let’s let others do the same.

