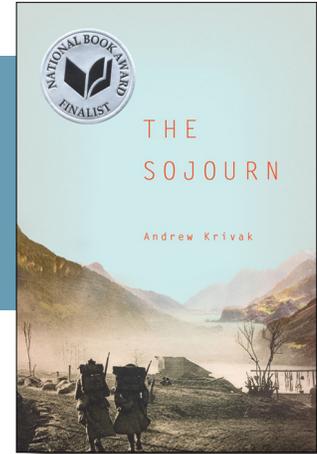




# The Sojourn

A novel by Andrew Krivak

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“*The Sojourn* is a work of uncommon strength by a writer of rare and powerful elegance about a war, now lost to living memory, that echoes in headlines of international strife to this day.” —**Mary Doria Russell**, author of *The Sparrow* and *Epitaph*

“Some writers are good at drawing a literary curtain over reality, and then there are writers who raise the veil and lead us to see for the first time. Krivak belongs to the latter. *The Sojourn*, about a war and a family and coming-of-age, does not present a single false moment of sentimental creation. Rather, it looks deeply into its characters’ lives with wisdom and humanity, and, in doing so, helps us experience a distant past that feels as if it could be our own.” —**National Book Award judges’ citation**

## INTRODUCTION

*The Sojourn* is a stirring tale of brotherhood, coming-of-age, and survival during World War I. Inspired by the author’s own family history, it evokes a time when Czechs, Slovaks, Austrians, and Germans fought on the same side while divided by language, ethnicity, and social class in the most brutal war to date. It is also a poignant tale of fathers and sons, addressing the great immigration to America and the desire to live the American dream amid the unfolding tragedy in Europe.

## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Like Jozef (the protagonist of *The Sojourn*), my grandfather, a “gunner” of the Austro-Hungarian army, also grew up with a stepmother, who said to him when he walked through the door, “Why aren’t you dead like all the rest of them?” That question has haunted me ever since I heard it told around the stove in my grandmother’s kitchen so many years ago. My grandfather’s survival, his coming-of-age story in another place, another country, is the reason why I can think of what it means to come of age, to have a history, to reflect on a past in another place, and to write about it. In my novel, I wanted to take the survival spirit of my grandparents and great-aunts and great-uncles—that spirit that is identifiably American—and place it back in the old country, in the mind, heart, and body of one man, and see how it was that that spirit survived in the sojourn of its youth.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. *The Sojourn* includes an epigraph from David Jones’s World War I poem *In Parenthesis*: “It’s difficult with the weight of the rifle. Leave it, under the oak.” The rifle is a symbol of war in the poet’s search for peace. What role, or roles, does the rifle play in the novel?
2. What are some of the “pieces” of America that Jozef’s father clings to when he moves back to the old country? Does this “education” Jozef receives make him in any way an “American” character? Why or why not?



3. How and where is the opening tragedy of the novel played out again in the life of the young Jozef Vinich? To what end?
4. *The Sojourn* begins with the rather uncommon act of a man and his son emigrating from America back to their native land of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the turn of the twentieth century. As a result, the main character (and the reader) is thrust into a strange culture and often untranslatable language. Does this create a sense of immersion or alienation?
5. Much of the middle section of *The Sojourn* takes place on ground covered—literally and figuratively—in the novels and memoirs of World War I literature, but a great deal of it is uniquely set on the forgotten southern front. In what other ways is *The Sojourn* similar to, or entirely different from, works by Americans, such as Hemingway, or even Germans, such as the novelist Remarque, who used the Great War to write about loss?
6. A “sojourn” is a time of rest in the middle of a journey, and yet this story is a classic bildungsroman, or “coming of age” novel. How might the idea of “sojourn” be instrumental in the young Jozef Vinich’s coming of age? What is the role of fate in the novel?
7. How much belief does the main character have in his own free will? And how does the struggle between free will and determinism play itself out within the novel?
8. In a review of *The Sojourn*, Deb Baker pointed out the “small acts” that appear at moments throughout the novel, which have life-altering results. In many ways, the entire structure of the novel moves according to this design. What are some moments you would identify as representing these “small acts”?
9. Late in the novel, the main character muses to an old man called Banquo on what, after the war, there is left to be afraid of. Banquo replies, “One single moment in which we die so that someone else lives. That’s it, and it is fearful because it cannot be seen, planned, or even known. It is simply lived.” Do Banquo’s words ring true? For Jozef Vinich? For you?
10. The author has said that this novel is loosely based on the experience of his Slovak grandfather, stories about whom were passed along to the author as a boy. He has chosen to use the first-person point of view and attempt an almost memoir-like story. Does he succeed? Is there a right way or a wrong way to tell family stories, and what, in your own experience, explains the desire to tell or re-tell?
11. While Jozef’s biological family plays an important role in the novel, he encounters and accepts new people into his “family,” first his adopted cousin (brother in arms) and then a woman struggling for survival whom he meets on his long walk home. What do you think his relationship with them says about the nature of family and the nature of love? What are our responsibilities to those we love?
12. Is this a novel—at its heart—about war or peace? Why?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andrew Krivak is the author of three novels: *The Bear*; *The Signal Flame*, a Chautauqua Prize finalist; and *The Sojourn*, a National Book Award finalist and winner of both the Chautauqua Prize and Dayton Literary Peace Prize. He is also the author of *A Long Retreat: In Search of a Religious Life*, a memoir about his eight years in the Jesuit Order, and editor of *The Letters of William Carlos Williams to Edgar Irving Williams, 1902–1912*, which received the Louis L. Martz Prize. Krivak lives with his wife and three children in Somerville, Massachusetts, and Jaffrey, New Hampshire.

## GO BEHIND THE SCENES

Find fascinating conversations with the author, learn more about the inspiration behind *The Sojourn*, read an excerpt from the novel, and discover a rich array of additional resources for your book club at [www.blpress.org](http://www.blpress.org).