

Reading Group Guide for

Cloudbreak, California

by Kelly Daniels

“Identity issues, father-son relationships, and surfing are themes that resonate in this fascinating recollection of a young man's coming of age ...this is an entertaining and well-crafted memoir ... Daniels's story will resonate with readers.

—*Publisher's Weekly*

“The opening chapter is a grabber, and once it's got you, the book that follows, hurtling off on a happenstance journey through Central America and back, won't let go. Kelly Daniels has written a memoir built for speed, but also one wise enough to know not to outpace its artfully understated emotion.”

—**Stuart Dybek**, *I Sailed With Magellan*, MacArthur Fellow

“To go from aimless, boozy wanderer to the author of a memoir as open-hearted and beautifully written as *Cloudbreak, California*, is a remarkable accomplishment. Kelly Daniels is living proof that life really does provide second chances if one has the guts and raw talent to go after them.”

—**Donald Ray Pollock**, *The Devil All the Time*

The writing is compelling, peopled with a pantheon of fellow drifters and down-at-their-heels natives ... Readers come to care about the young Daniels and his struggle to find his niche in the world.

—*ForeWord Reviews*, Karen Mulvahill

“Kelly Daniels's *Cloudbreak, California* comes at you like breakers on the shore. It's a memoir that reads like a Beat novel, but with more heart and more guts. A story about family and love and finding your way, it's also a manual on how to become a writer. And how to become a man.”

—**Peter Geye**, *The Lighthouse Road*

“... As a young man with more than his share of nerve, he outwanders even his hapless father, and his remarkable life story comes within a hair of being a death story enough times to keep the reader breathless. Daniels's sure-handed demotic prose shimmers into poetry in the scenes where he finally learns to surf with his aging father.”

—**Jaimy Gordon**, *Lord of Misrule*, National Book Award winner

About the Book

One day during his ninth-grade Speech class Kelly Daniels' outlaw, soul-surfer father appears at school unannounced and pulls the boy from class. Speeding down the freeway, Daniels' father admits that he has been involved in a crime, but he does not remember how it happened. He'd been up for days on cocaine and booze, he explains, and the next thing he knew he woke up in jail with a bad feeling. It was almost a relief when the guard told him he'd killed his cousin Barkley, a drug kingpin of sorts. "I'm sorry to lay this on you," he tells the stunned boy, "but I'm not going to be around to watch your back. Barkley has a son your age...and this kid might come after you someday. You're going to have to learn to look after yourself." A few days later, the father skips bail and flees the country. "Forget about him," everybody says. But the boy doesn't forget. Someday, he believes, they'll find each other, the fugitive father and the dreamy son, and together they'll surf perfect, far-away waves.

About the Author

Kelly Daniels grew up on the road, living for stints with his parents in a Hawaiian commune, a waterless, powerless cabin in the desert, and in an old step-van outfitted with bunks. As an adult, he set off on his own, traveling extensively through Europe, Mexico and Central America. Along the way, he picked up odd jobs when he could find them, jobs such as production manager of a furniture factory (Guatemala), newspaper reporter (Mexico), and bartender (all over).

His fiction and nonfiction has appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, *Cimarron Review*, *Third Coast*, *Sonora Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Santa Clara Review*, *GSU Review*, *Orange Coast Review*, *Eyeshot* and other journals. Among other awards, he recently won first prize in Creative Nonfiction at the San Miguel Writers' Conference. He lives with his wife and young son in Rock Island, Illinois, where he teaches creative writing at Augustiana College.

A Chat with the Author

[Coming Soon]

Discussion Questions

1. How is the father's crime responsible for everything else that follows in the book? How might things have played out differently if he hadn't gotten into such serious trouble?
2. Daniels felt "wonderful" upon hearing about his father's crime. Later, this fact somehow helps transform him for the better. Can you explain this reaction to such tragic and upsetting news?
3. Why does Daniels "flee" the country upon hearing the news about his father's capture? How aware is he of what he's doing?
4. Many memoirs have been written about counterculture childhoods—*The Glass Castle*, *Split*, *Pagan Time*, *Wild Child*—but *Cloudbreak, California* is one of the few, or only, memoirs written by a son and not a daughter. How does Daniels's sex play into his life story? How might things have turned out differently had he been a daughter?
5. Daniels is in a rare position to experience two very different parts of the social continuum. He grows up hippy poor, with regular long visits to his Nouveau riche grandparents. Later, he constantly struggles to support himself. What can be said of his experience about money, about being born with or without it? Imagine the story without the help of his grandparents.
6. College, it could be argued, saved Daniels's life. Are the same opportunities to study available to young people today as they were for Daniels? What would have happened to him had the story taken place today?
7. How does the book argue for the value of travel? How does it argue against travel?
8. This story spans three generations: the greatest generation, the baby boomers, and generation X. What does it say about each? Do the various characters fairly represent their respective generations?
9. Daniels's parents obviously made a lot of mistakes over the course of this narrative. Did they do anything right? What can the book teach us about parenting?
10. The story ends happily. Does the ending seem justified? Do you doubt anything about the final words? If so, why?

For Further Reading

The Glass Castle by Jeannette Walls

This Boy's Life by Tobias Wolff

The Liars' Club by Mary Karr

Another Bullshit Night in Suck City by Nick Flynn