

# GIBSON HOUSE

P R E S S

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## Reading Group Guide: *The Cold Last Swim* by Junior Burke

### About *The Cold Last Swim*

**It's December 1954. During a live television performance of the *General Electric Theater*, James Dean brandishes a pistol at fellow actor (and weekly show-host) Ronald Reagan.**

Dean goes off script and kicks off an alternate history, a “sliding doors” narrative that mixes real and imagined events. *The Cold Last Swim* features two cultural icons: one who would be dead within a year, immortalized as a symbol of cool rebellion; the other, in a little over a quarter century, would become leader of the free world, the standard bearer of traditional and even fundamentalist values. Each reflects fifties America: Reagan is firmly established among the open freeways and unblemished skies of sunny Los Angeles; Jimmy, emerging from the black-and-white shadows of a rainy New York street.

*The Cold Last Swim* by Junior Burke is published by Gibson House Press, May 2020. Original trade paperback, \$16.99 ISBN: 978-1-948721-10-3. Ebook formats, \$9.99

### Reviews

“1954 – the young James Dean shoots Ronald Reagan on live TV. Dumped by the studios, Dean doesn’t make Giant and isn’t killed in a car crash. Instead, he jumps bail, disappears, disastrously impacts lives, and becomes . . . well, that would be telling. *The Cold Last Swim* is entertaining and surprising all the way to the end.”—Alex Cox, director-writer of *Repo Man* and *Sid & Nancy* and author of *The President and the Provocateur: The Parallel Lives of JFK and Lee Harvey Oswald*

“In this shrewd reimagining of James Dean’s life and death, Burke concocts a mesmerizing ‘sliding doors’ narrative that asks the reader to consider the ‘what if?’ of Dean surviving that infamous car crash. With smartly noirish rhythms and a cast of colorful, quirky characters, we find ourselves tossed between incredulity and eagerness, driven to discover where the ‘alternate history’ of this cultural icon just may take us.”—Lorraine Devon Wilke, author of *The Alchemy of Noise and After the Sucker Punch*

“Quentin Tarantino isn’t the only writer around today who is offering an alternate history to famous cultural events. In his compelling and richly entertaining novel *The Cold Last Swim*, Junior Burke presents his own version of what happened to James Dean, that ultimate icon of cool, in this luminous love letter to Hollywood and the golden age of filmmaking. Full of surprises, it is a joy from beginning to end.”—June Skinner Sawyers, co-editor, *Long Walk Home: Reflections on Bruce Springsteen*

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## About the author

Besides *The Cold Last Swim*, Junior Burke is the author of the novels *Something Gorgeous* and *A Thousand Eyes*. He is also a songwriter and recording artist whose 2007 album *While You Were Gone* was named by New York's Bowery Poetry Club as one of the best releases of that year. Other albums include *Spot of Time* (2017) and the EP *America's a Lonely Town* (2019). He lives in rural Colorado. Visit [juniorburke.com](http://juniorburke.com).

## Conversation starters

1. How do you feel about Alternate History novels in general?
2. What do you think the title *A Cold Last Swim* signifies?
3. Do you find the portrayals of James Dean and Ronald Reagan believable?
4. How are the themes of loneliness/love (or truth/lies or bravery/bravado) explored in the book?
5. Of the supporting ensemble—journalists Garland Alpert and Oona Stickney, photographer Hiram Freeman, record producer Specs Pelham, artist-ingenue Jill Parnell, and teenage fan Grace Hobson—who do you find most interesting or relate to the most? Which do you find tragic? Emblematic of the times?
6. How is humor used in the novel? How would you describe Burke's sense of humor?
7. Do you see either Jimmy or Zeke Mallory as an antihero?
8. What did you think of the ending? Was it a surprise?
9. Which of the surviving characters would you like to see in a sequel?
10. Has reading this novel affected how you see this time period?