



Twenty-six by Leo McKay Jr.

About the author:

Leo McKay Jr. is a writer and a teacher. He currently lives in Truro, Nova Scotia, where he has been a full-time high school teacher since 1994. His critically acclaimed 2003 novel, *Twenty-six*, was based on the 1992 Westray Mine Disaster, an event that took place not far from McKay's birthplace in Pictou County, Nova Scotia. In the fall of 2010, online public recommendation placed *Twenty-six* on CBC Canada Reads list of Forty Essential Canadian Novels of the Decade. In 2012, *Twenty-six* was chosen as the inaugural book for the One Book Nova Scotia event.

McKay was born and raised in the town of Stellarton, Nova Scotia, where he graduated from Stellarton High School in 1982. He grew up in the small working class Stellarton neighborhood called the Red Row, a neighborhood made up of hundred-year-old former mining company duplexes. Both of his parents grew up in the same neighborhood. His mother, Georgina Bellick, was the daughter of Eastern European immigrants. His father, Leo McKay Sr., who lived in the Red Row until his death in 2011, was a riveter at the railcar factory in nearby Trenton before becoming a career labour leader, social activist, New Democrat politician, and eventually a member of Stellarton Town Council.

Leo McKay Jr. studied English at St. Francis Xavier University, French at Laval, Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia, and Education at Dalhousie. He lived in Asia for four years in his young adulthood.

Source: <https://leomckay.com/>



About this book:

An ambitious first novel, centered around a fictional mine disaster in small town Nova Scotia. Inspired by real events, *Twenty-six* examines the lives of characters before and after the tragedy, and probes deeply into family loyalties, survivor guilt, and key issues (personal choices, economic pressures, family expectations) surrounding the very worst-case scenario of workplace safety: death on the job. *Twenty-six* manages to face the darkest depths of human tragedy while remaining an essentially optimistic book: a book about love, a book about loyalty, a book about how to wrestle life from the jaws of death.

Source: <https://leomckay.com/>

Discussion Questions:

1. *Twenty-Six* is a book that draws parallels to a real life event—the 1992 Westray mine disaster. What other books have you read that fictionalize history? What are the advantages of using fiction to tell an account of a real event? What are the disadvantages?
2. What do you recall of the Westray mine disaster? Did it have an impact on you? Do you have a different perspective after having read *Twenty-Six*?
3. *Twenty-Six* is told in a nonlinear fashion: the action jumps through time and back again. Did you like this approach to storytelling? What is gained by this way of framing? What is lost?
4. Do you think of *Twenty-Six* as largely a personal or a political story? Can it be both?

July 2016



5. *Twenty-Six* is very much a Nova Scotian story, but is it exclusively so? What universal ideas or themes could a reader not from the region take from this novel?
6. While a work of fiction, *Twenty-Six* is meant to be a reflection of life in rural Nova Scotia. Do you think that it presents an accurate depiction?
7. Outside of the story of the mine disaster, *Twenty-Six* can also be read as a bildungsroman—a coming-of-age story. What do you think of the character of Ziv? How does he develop and change over the course of the book?
8. *Twenty-Six* is also a story of fathers and sons: do you feel these relationships were depicted realistically? What is *Twenty-Six* trying to say about the relationships between fathers and sons?
9. If *Twenty-Six* is a story about fathers, sons and men in industry, what is the role of the female characters in the novel? Each of the Burrows men is affected by their relationship with the women in their lives. How do you think these female characters influenced the actions and personalities of their male counterparts?
10. Meta—Ziv’s ex-girlfriend—now lives in Japan. How does the storyline in Japan fit into the overall story of *Twenty-Six*? Are there parallels between Meta’s experiences in Japan and Ziv’s in Nova Scotia? Why do you think the author chose Japan as a secondary setting and not another country?
11. *Twenty-Six* contains many depictions of both substance and spousal abuse: how did these situations affect you as a reader?
12. Two major themes in *Twenty-Six* are choice versus destiny and obligation versus opportunity. How do these themes influence the outcomes for each character in the novel? What is the author saying about the influence of these forces in our lives and relationships?



13. The characters and towns in the novel face struggles with unemployment and dependence on an industry in decline. Do you think that there are any similarities between what was happening in the novel and what is occurring in small-town Nova Scotia today? What are the differences?

14. What does the image on the cover of the book say to you? There are different pictures on the hard and soft cover editions of the book: do you prefer one over the other? Why?

Source: <http://1bns.ca/book-club-discussion-guide/>

Other formats available at Halifax Public Libraries:

- eBook
- Audiobook