



READING GUIDE: *THE END OF OCTOBER*, BY LAWRENCE WRIGHT

Summary of the project

The reading and discussions of *The End of October* are the first part of community conversations about health care resources in the Big Bend region. The novel will provide a community-wide starting point on which to base these discussions of health care with a focus on the resources in our area. These resources are limited under ordinary circumstances and have been stressed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of the community conversations is to provide forums for area residents to discuss their experiences with health care resources. Health care professionals recognize the challenges that they face in providing appropriate care; others in the community recognize the challenges that they face in accessing care. Both groups see the challenges largely from their own limited perspective. The conversations will allow all individuals to see the issues from multiple viewpoints. The goal is to arrive at an understanding of the issues faced by disparate individuals and share these perceptions with state, county, and city governments.

Calendar of project events

August and September—Reading and discussions of *The End of October*

Last week of September—Live-streamed discussion with author Lawrence Wright

October—Forum for community members to discuss health care resources from their own perspectives

Biography of the author

Lawrence Wright is an author, a screenwriter, a playwright, and, since 1992, a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine.

A graduate of Tulane University and the American University in Cairo, Wright has written for several publications, starting, in 1971, with *The Race Relations Reporter* in Nashville, Tennessee. He has also written for *Texas Monthly*, *Rolling Stone*, and *The New Yorker*, which commissioned him to write “The Plague Year” for the January 4 & 11, 2021, issue of the magazine. This 40-page article covering the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S. won a National Magazine Award for reporting and is the basis for Wright’s nonfiction book of the same name.

Wright is the author of several nonfiction books, including *Going Clear: Scientology, Hollywood, and the Prison of Belief*; *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction; *God Save Texas: A Journey into the Soul of the Lone Star State*; and, most recently, *The Plague Year*.

Wright has published two novels: *God’s Favorite* and the bestselling, critically acclaimed *The End of October*.

Wright is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Society of American Historians. He also plays keyboard in the Austin-based blues band WhoDo.

Historical context for the book

Wright began writing his novel in 2017, completed it in the summer of 2019, and published it in the spring of 2020, in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. In an interview on NPR's *All Things Considered*, he noted the coincidence, but maintained that it was not coincidental that there were parallels between the actual situation and the plot of the book. "I researched it very carefully and I talked to people who *knew* what was going to happen. They laid it out for me. . . . So the fact that it's unfolding as they suggested it would and as I reflected in the novel is no surprise at all" (<https://www.npr.org/2020/04/28/846807025/this-is-creepy-lawrence-wright-wishes-his-pandemic-novel-had-gotten-it-wrong>).

Tips for discussion facilitators

You may include other questions that encourage discussion of characters, plot, or themes, but please allow time for questions 3 and 4 to address our focus on community health care resources. You might begin by assuring members of your group that there will be ample time at the end for personal reactions to the pandemic and to their experience of reading the novel.

Discussion questions

1. The main character is Henry Parsons, a CDC official and epidemiologist, but other characters play prominent roles. In what ways would the novel change if the story were told from the perspective of a different character?
2. Wright extensively researched his topic and filled his novel with facts about diseases and past pandemics. In what ways does including the information gleaned from the research add to or detract from the story?
3. How has the 2020–21 pandemic in the Big Bend been different from or less devastating than the one depicted in the novel?
4. In what ways has the pandemic been difficult in the Big Bend and for what reasons?
5. How has reading a novel about a pandemic in the middle of a pandemic affected you?

Reviews of the book

The Atlantic

May 13, 2020

"A Pandemic Novel That's Oddly Soothing"

Sophie Gilbert

Wright, a Pulitzer Prize winner for his 2006 nonfiction book, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11*, is a dogged reporter who puts his supposed foreknowledge with *The End of October* down to simple research. . . . The propulsive plot is counterweighted with rigorous, gracefully presented context on the history and behavior of diseases. . . . But the novel also seems to have started with a particular end point in mind: the degeneration of humanity. As Wright has it, after the director Ridley Scott read Cormac McCarthy's 2006 apocalyptic novel, *The Road*, he asked Wright what event might have happened to precipitate such a callous and bestial world, with its cannibalism, infanticide, and wanton misery. *The End of October* was Wright's way of filling in the blanks—of sketching out the details of a plausible

extinction-level event severe enough to spark total societal breakdown. . . . Most people have shown themselves to be far better than *The End of October* imagined and far braver and kinder than many of those in power, and there's at least some comfort to be found in that.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2020/05/lawrence-wright-end-of-october-oddly-comforting-pandemic-novel/611596/>

New York Times

May 1, 2020

"An Eerily Prescient Pandemic Novel That's Guaranteed to Terrify"

Douglas Preston

What makes Lawrence Wright's "The End of October" exceptional is the same quality that elevated Defoe's work: deep, thorough research. Wright is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "The Looming Tower" and other nonfiction books, and here he applies the magisterial force of his reporting skills into spinning a novel of pestilence, war and social collapse that, given the current pandemic, cuts exceedingly close to the bone.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/books/review/lawrence-wright-end-of-october.html>

Washington Post

April 24, 2020

"The fiction writers saw it coming: The plot of *The End of October* feels all too real"

Marion Winik

Perhaps not surprisingly, the most captivating parts of his novel are his explanations of science. . . . The tricky thing is that because this is fiction, you're not sure where the research ends and the dark fantasy begins.

https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/the-fiction-writers-saw-it-coming-the-plot-of-the-end-of-october-feels-all-too-real/2020/04/21/fb85fb3a-80cc-11ea-9040-68981f488eed_story.html

Recommended and related resources

"The Plague Year," Lawrence Wright, *The New Yorker* January 4 & 11, 2021

The Plague Year: America in the Time of COVID, Lawrence Wright

A Journal of the Plague Year, Daniel Defoe

The Plague, Albert Camus

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague, Geraldine Brooks

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR APL COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ON HEALTH CARE

Alpine and Brewster County are considered frontier areas:

- low population numbers per square mile
- remoteness from metropolitan centers
- Big Bend National Park and Big Bend Ranch State Park make up 20 percent of the landmass of Brewster County

Alpine's Big Bend Regional Medical Center

- Serves three counties
- 25 beds
- 3 ICU beds
- Level IV Trauma Center
- The closest higher level trauma centers are in Midland-Odessa and El Paso

All three counties are also designated by the Health Resources and Services Administration as Health Professional Shortage Areas (HPSAs) because of the high ratio of patient to provider.

BREWSTER COUNTY HEALTH PROFESSIONAL SHORTAGE AREAS

		Date of Designation	Last Update
Primary Care	YES	June 21, 2002	August 17, 2020
Dental Care	YES	January 10, 2020	January 10, 2020
Mental Health	YES	September 11, 2018	September 11, 2018