



Last Mass, truly, is about mass—not just as ritual to perform, but as land to claim, wealth to seize, people to conquer, murder to commit, and psychosis to drive it all. An elegy, that's this book, and a history, and a poem, too. And while of course it's about the sorrow of last things, it's still more about what makes the story of California, and of Jamie Iredell himself, a Californian Catholic. But within these stories lies another yet, and, in the wrangling of the bind it presents, another sort of mass. How do you reconcile your love for the California you call home, for your deeply pious Californian family, with the history—protracted and hellish—that is the father of both? Iredell navigates his world with deftness, beauty, brutality, and light. In the face of so much, it's a feat next to holy.

-D. FOY, author of *Made to Break*

TEACHING GUIDE

LAST MASS

by Jamie Iredell

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Recommended Classes:

- Creative Writing
- Creative Nonfiction & Memoir
- US / California / Native American History
- Contemporary / American Literature
- Experimental Writing
- Forms & Theories of Creative Nonfiction
- Postcolonial Studies
- Literary Criticism
- Catholic Studies

Keywords:

Creative Nonfiction / Memoir / Lyric Essay / US History / California / Father Junípero Serra / Catholicism / Ritual / Inheritance / Native American / Postcolonialism / Home / Popular Culture

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How successful would you argue is the author's form for the subject matter of this book?
2. Discuss the lyric essay as a form. What characterizes a lyric essay? Does *Last Mass* qualify as an example of the form?
3. In the same year that this book was published the Pope of the Catholic church canonized Junípero Serra as a saint. Having read some of Serra's history, discuss your thoughts and feelings regarding these actions by the church?

4. Discuss the narrator's reliability. Do you trust what the narrator tells you, despite his admissions of having an extremely awed persona?
5. Throughout the text, the narrator refers to numerous examples of popular culture, in particular film—*Jaws*, *Star Wars*, *The Godfather*, to name a few. How do you think these references fit into a story that is largely about the author's own life, and that of an 18th century friar?
6. Choose a single paragraph from *Last Mass* and analyze the prose in terms of metrics, assonance, consonance, repetition, and rhyme. Discuss your discoveries with the class.

Possible Assignment:

- First, have students write a brief a paragraph that describes a defining moment in their life: something that stands out in their memory, from any age, that contributed to the kind of person they are today. Second, after students have drafted this paragraph, have them select a detail from the description—any detail: say the cupboard from which a student's mother would retrieve the can of canned Campbell's tomato soup on rainy days. Have the students conduct some internet-based research for a while on that detail. They should collect notes while conducting their research. Then, they should write a short paragraph about their findings. Third, students should find a link in their second paragraph to some aspect of popular culture. For example, if a student did some research of Campbell's tomato soup, they might come across Andy Warhol's famous *Campbell's Soup Cans*. They should write about that aspect of pop culture. Fourth, they should circle back to the origin paragraph, the defining moment from a period in their life, and how the soup played into that. After students have completed one round of this exercise with instructor guidance, allow students to go off on their own for thirty minutes (or other defined period of time) to do another round or two on individually. In this way, students can create their own braided essays, that combine personal story with researched material, connected through poetic association.