

Heartland by Anthony Cartwright

A Reading Group Guide

About the Author

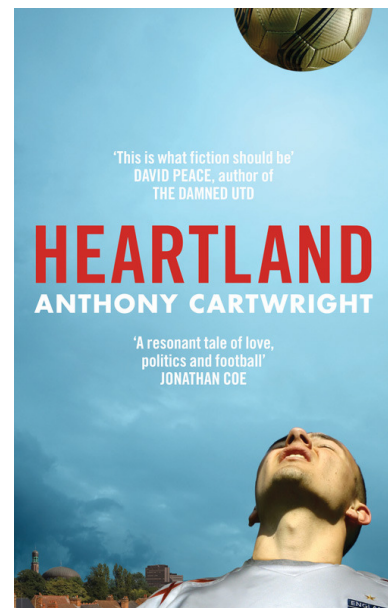
Anthony Cartwright was born in Dudley in 1973. In 1993 he left to study English and American literature at UEA. Having worked in factories, meatpacking plants, pubs and warehouses and with London Underground, in 1998 he trained as an English teacher, working for years in the East End of London and now in Nottinghamshire. His debut *The Afterglow* won much acclaim – and a Betty Trask Award in 2004.



The Story

It is Spring 2002 in the Black Country, with local elections looming. A mosque is being built on the site where Cinderheath's iconic steelworks once centred the town. 'The Tipton Three', from just down the road, are imprisoned in Guantanamo; the BNP expect to win new seats on the council. St. George's flags fly from cars and windows: the World Cup is beginning, England to play Argentina. But first, a controversial Sunday-league football game must take place, billed by the press as 'a match to spark a race war'.

Rob, once a professional footballer like his famous father, is now a track-suited teaching assistant, sympathetic to the children of families he knows too well. On the pitch, as the BNP prowl the touchlines, he finds himself facing Zubair, the brother of his missing best friend. Both men are bound together by the mystery of Adnan's disappearance.



Reading Group Questions

- The narrative in *Heartland* moves between different perspectives of characters such as Rob, Jim, Jasmin, Zubair and Adnan. Do you think this is an effective way to broaden the story?
- Rob has been a professional footballer. He is now a sympathetic and effective teaching assistant, but talks of himself as a failure. He is trying hard to make sense of the people around him – his friendships, his relationships, his politics. How sympathetic do you find his outlook on his society? How much is his story also the story of his town?

- Rob’s Muslim friends and the Mosque football team offer an insight into some of the tensions in society post 9/11. How accurately and sympathetically are the racial complications presented in the novel, do you think?
- Jim Bayliss, a veteran Labour Councillor, is bemused by what he sees as a “plague” of St. George’s flags on his estate when his seat is under threat from the BNP. Yet Jim sees himself as a patriot, bemoaning the people who used to stop him on St. George’s Day and ask why he was wearing a red rose. Why have signs of patriotism become so confusing for the characters in *Heartland*?
- Rob’s childhood friend Glenn has gradually come to support the BNP – and their view of Britishness. Do we understand why? Do his opinions change throughout the book?
- Is Rob’s headteacher right to make him take off his England shirt at school?
- What does Anthony Cartwright’s use of phonetic dialect spelling add to the novel?
- Anthony doesn’t separate dialogue with speech marks. Responding to a telling-off for this on the Simon Mayo show, he explained that he wanted his characters’ dialect to have the same weight as the standard English in the novel – he didn’t want it held apart. What are the benefits and drawbacks of his approach?
- Why does it matter to Rob whether England beat Argentina?
- How important in this novel is the idea of competition and having to choose sides?
- Do you need to enjoy football to like this book? Did you enjoy the football scenes?

Further Reading

Fiction

The Damned Utd by David Peace

The Afterglow by Anthony Cartwright

What Was Lost by Catherine O’Flynn

Netherland by Joseph O’Neill

Non Fiction

My Father and Other Working Class Heroes by Gary Imlach

On Football by Jorge Valdano

The Boy Wonders: Duncan Edwards, Wayne Rooney and the Changing Face of Football by Colin Malam

Reading and Writing – an interview with Anthony Cartwright

How long have you been a writer?

I started writing with an idea of getting published in 1998 – the year I started to train as an English teacher – but since I can remember I always thought like I was a ‘writer’. My first novel, *The Afterglow* was published in 2004 and my second, *Heartland*, in 2009. Both are with Tindal Street Press.

What inspires you to write?

A mixture of things I've seen and heard about, Black Country stories, other books and writers

Who is your favourite writer/s?

Current XI (several other first teamers mentioned elsewhere in this article): Albert Camus, Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, John Berger, Mario Vargas Llosa, David Peace, Ahmadou Kourouma, Paul Auster, George Orwell, Don DeLillo, Gabriel Garcia Marquez

What are you working on at the moment?

Right now, I'm working on an essay about a book called *King Dido* by the unjustly neglected novelist Alexander Baron. *King Dido* is a novel from the sixties set in 1913 in Bethnal Green, about gangs, territory and "respect". It's being republished in the autumn by Five Leaves Press. His work deserves to be much more widely available. I'm also writing my 3rd novel, to be published by Tindal Street Press. Working title: *How I Killed Margaret Thatcher* (mind you, that was a working title for my last two books as well!).

What are you reading at the moment?

David Peace's *Red Riding Quartet* – I've loved his more recent books – and David Belbin's *The Pretender*, a skilful coming of age story that begins with a young writer successfully forging one of Hemingway's lost Paris stories. I'm looking forward to reading Kamila Shamsie's *Burnt Shadows* and Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*.

What advice would you give to aspiring writers?

Read as widely as you can. Keep working. Write the stuff you'd like to read. Two books that might help: *On Becoming a Novelist* and *The Craft of Fiction: Notes for Young Writers* both by John Gardner.

What book has made you laugh?

Paul McDonald's brilliant comic novels set in Walsall, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, *Allah is not Obligated* by Ahmadou Kourouma.

What book has made you cry?

Parts of *Suttree*, *Cities of the Plain* and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy: an amazing writer. Also, *Allah is not Obligated* by Ahmadou Kourouma, an incredible novel – funny and tragic – narrated in the voice of a West African child soldier.

What book would you recommend to a friend and why?

Actually, some I've just mentioned. Cormac McCarthy's *Border Trilogy* and Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer* because they feature brilliant friendships and maybe tell us something about being a friend.

What was the last book you borrowed from the library?

Gideon Haigh's books about the last two Ashes series and *Against Interpretation* by Susan Sontag. One of the great things about public libraries is the fantastic mix: of books and people.