EDEN FADING

A Reading Guide for Book Clubs

Chapter-by-chapter summaries and discussion questions

Michael Barnett

michaelbarnettbooks.com

About the Book

Southern California, 1961: orange groves, a white picket fence, and a young family just getting started. But three-year-old Mike harbors something dark, a spirit bent on destroying his little brother. Inspired by the author's own memories from 1961 to 1966, Eden Fading is a story of faith, family, and the redemption that can grow from the darkest places.

The story is told by mysterious "watchers" who follow the Barnett family from San Bernardino to Elsinore, Indiana, Utah, and Disneyland. Mom and Dad are Glenda and Buck. The boys are Mike, Jerry, Jimmy, and, from 1963, Davey.

How to Use This Guide

- Each of the nine chapters has a short reminder of what happens, followed by questions. You don't need to cover every question. Choose the ones that spark the most conversation.
- The guide follows the order of the book, and the summaries contain spoilers for each chapter. The last chapter, "Final Departures," reveals who the watchers are, so save it for after everyone has finished.
- If your group meets more than once, a natural split is three meetings: chapters 1–3, chapters 4–6, and chapters 7–9 with the big-picture questions.
- A word of care: the book includes scenes of children in danger and of harsh 1960s discipline. Some members may want to share their own family memories, and others may prefer to listen.

About the Author

Michael Barnett grew up in San Bernardino, California, and Lafayette, Indiana. He earned a full academic scholarship to Purdue University and served in the U.S. Air Force, where he met his wife of 47 years while training in San Antonio. After a long career in information technology, he began writing at his brother's urging: as the family storyteller, he should put their story into words. Eden Fading, drawn from his own childhood memories, was his first book. He has since published the science-fiction thriller When Earthlings Weep and is finishing his third novel, Raine Rising. He lives in the Dallas area.

Chapter 1: K Street

August 1961

What happens: On a lazy Monday in San Bernardino, three-year-old Mike talks his little brother Jerry into drinking lighter fluid from a beer bottle. Mike swallowed some too and lies about it. Their neighbor Maria Reyes senses that something is wrong and rushes him to the hospital. There a smug chief of staff threatens to call the police, and the two boys turn the children's ward upside down until the nurses strap them into cribs.

For discussion

1. The story is told by "we, the watchers." Who did you imagine the watchers were as you read this first chapter? How did that point of view change the way you experienced the scene at the picnic table?
2. Mike is three years old, yet Maria sees "a look that can kill" in her rearview mirror, and Mike's own thought is, "How do I kill him next time?" How did you react to a toddler drawn this way? Did you read him as evil, as troubled, or as something else?
3. Maria has "a moment of enlightenment" that likely saves Mike's life. Watch for neighbors and outsiders as you read on. What part do they play in protecting this family?
4. In the waiting room, Buck blames Glenda in front of strangers, and she bites back what she almost said. What do we learn about their marriage, and about the weight a young mother carried in 1961?
5. Dr. Savage enjoys the power to "first convict and then pardon" the young couple. How does the book portray the doctors, nurses, and later the police and neighbors who sit in judgment of this family?
6. Nurse Joanna realizes about the crib-diving, "They didn't know, did they? Yet, they did it anyway." Is the boys' fearlessness courage, recklessness, or something deeper?
7. Glenda quietly asks for a set of the hospital straps to take home. Did you sympathize with her? What would you have done in her place?

Chapter 2: Home, Deadly Home

November 1961 to June 1962

What happens: As Glenda washes dishes, she remembers the past: Buck dropping Mike on the sidewalk, the kitchen floor covered in grease and frozen vegetables, and Mike's first words, "The bottle." Meanwhile Mike takes the hangman's noose Buck tied the night before and nearly strangles Jerry with it. Six calmer months follow, full of family walks past Green Valley, the giant pine marked "57," and the witch's house. Then Mike convinces the Sánchez family that Jerry has died.

For discussion

1. When Mike splits his head open, Buck tells him, "Now, look what you just did. You broke the sidewalk!" and never apologizes. Where else do you see Buck's habits reflected in Mike?
2. The grease-and-vegetables mess troubles Glenda because it is only "almost chaos." Someone planned it. Why is planned mischief more frightening than random mischief?

3. Glenda remembers two-year-old Mike grieving over a sugar ant as if he had lost a pet. How do you reconcile that tender child with the boy who pulls the noose tight?
4. In the noose scene, Buck saves Jerry "without hesitation, without emotion," then says gently, "Hold on Hon, let him breathe." He cuts the noose into twenty pieces. What did this moment reveal about the father?
5. Green Valley, the giant pine with its painted "57," and the witch's house are places of both magic and dread. What places like these did you have as a child?
6. Mike tells his story about Jerry's death the same way every time, and four adults believe him. Why do you think he did it? What does it show about his gifts, and about the danger in them?
7. The chapter closes with Elvis singing "The Devil in Disguise" while Mike is punished. Songs drifting from radios close many scenes in the book. What did they add for you?

Chapter 3: Day of Sacrifice

August 1962 to February 1963

What happens: At their grandparents' home in Elsinore, Mike pours gasoline on an ant mound and sets it alight. He watches, baffled, as the ants run back into the flames. Next he lights the dry grass in a vacant lot, and the fire nearly reaches the neighbors' homes. A mob of neighbors spanks him on his grandparents' porch while his family stands by. That fall the Cuban Missile Crisis shakes Mike's sense of safety, and a fight in the walnut tree ends with Jerry falling fifteen feet.

For discussion

1. The chapter title comes from the ants that run back into the fire to save their colony. Mike decides they must be "defective." What can't he understand? Why do you think the author built a chapter around this image?
2. Jerry refuses to help burn the ants, saying simply, "Spiders don't have babies." What does Jerry understand that Mike doesn't?
3. From the window, Mike watches neighbors fight the fire to protect their homes and wonders if they are martyrs too. Where else in the book do people put themselves at risk for someone else?
4. The neighborhood spanking is one of the hardest scenes in the book, and Mike's family gives it "quiet consent." How did you feel reading it? Was it justice, cruelty, or both? What does it say about crowds?
5. Grandpa holds Buck back with a single word: "Wait." What do the grandparents, with their waffles, homemade syrup, and table prayers, bring to these boys' lives?
6. The Cuban Missile Crisis is the first time Mike faces something "utterly out of his control." Do you remember a world event that changed how you saw the world as a child?
7. After Jerry falls from the tree, Mike sits alone bouncing a walnut and whispers, "I wish I was a Jetson…or a Flintstone." What is he really wishing for?

Chapter 4: The End of Summer and Halloween Arrives

May to November 1963

What happens: Davey, the fourth son, is born. Glenda has lost a second daughter to miscarriage and gives up her hope of a girl. Mike hates starting school, Buck tosses the fighting boys onto the roofs, and on Halloween Jimmy walks off the porch in his Casper mask. Mike and Jerry are blamed. On November 22, Mike finds his mother weeping over President Kennedy and cries with her.

For discussion

1. Glenda carries quiet losses: two daughters miscarried and a dream given up. How does the book handle the griefs she keeps to herself?
2. With each new son the chaos grows not by addition but "geometric progression." How does the arrival of Jimmy and Davey reshape the pecking order among the brothers?
3. Buck throws both boys onto the roofs, waves, and says, "Look, they stopped." Did you find it funny, alarming, or both? How has the way we see discipline changed since 1963?
4. On Halloween, Buck blames Mike and Jerry for Jimmy's fall. When he learns the truth, he won't apologize. "The children in this house have no voice." What does it do to a child to be blamed for something he didn't do?
5. Mike and his mother cry together for a President he barely knew. Why do you think the author placed a moment of shared tenderness here?

Chapter 5: The Monster in the Light

January to June 1964

What happens: Mike discovers that stories can rule his brothers. He invents a monster living in the bedroom light and a Boogie Man lurking in the "other" Green Valley beside the highway. One night he and Jerry climb the giant pine to touch the moon. He spends quiet mornings on the stoop with Emma, a girl who seems to see straight through him. Then a gang of teenagers beats up Mike and his friend Richie while the neighbors watch from their windows.

For discussion

1. Mike learns that storytelling can make his brothers obey through fear. Eden Fading was written by "the family storyteller." How did you read this chapter knowing that? Can the same gift be used for good or for harm?
2. Jimmy's "fring fries" sets the whole table laughing and melts the tension between Buck and Glenda. What role does laughter play in this family?
3. Mike may have invented the Boogie Man partly to keep his brothers away from the busy highway. Was it a lie, a protection, or both?
4. On the night they climb to touch the moon, the brothers tell each other, "You almost touched the moon!" What does this scene show about the bond between Mike and Jerry?

5. Emma is “somehow able to see through his little boy bluster to the real person underneath.” What does Mike find with Emma that he finds nowhere else? Why do you think he leaves so suddenly?
6. Surrounded by the teenagers, Mike blurts out the truth: “They’re eggs. Robin’s eggs, I think.” Why do you think he speaks up?
7. Two drivers, a young mother, and three housewives (two of them mothers of the bullies) all see the beating and do nothing. Compare them with the mob in Elsinore. When do bystanders act, and when do they look away?

Chapter 6: Early Departure

June to summer 1964

What happens: Mike learns that Emma has died of a heart defect. He walks home in a downpour as “Where Have All the Flowers Gone” plays from a passing truck, and for the first time a song speaks to him. At the YMCA, the boy his father once threw into the deep end saves Jimmy from drowning. Then Mike and Jerry explore every place that “doesn’t belong”: the stairs behind the witch’s house, a Sabre jet hidden behind a fence, and finally the caves under the drive-in screen. To get there they ride across Mount Vernon at rush hour. Sergeant Martinez brings them home.

For discussion

1. Mike has never known what to do with his hands when someone hugs him. Here, in the rain, he cries for Emma and “most of all…for the white wedding dress she would have someday worn.” How does grief change him?
2. The white crape myrtle seems to glow in the storm, then goes dark. It was only a car’s headlights. Why do you think Mike simply nods, “Of course it went out”?
3. Watching him sleep, Glenda sees not “the mean little monster” but “a boy…just as innocent and delicate as the other three.” What let her see him that way on this particular day?
4. Buck taught Mike to swim by throwing him into the deep end. A year later, still afraid of deep water, Mike is the one who notices Jimmy and pulls him out. What do you make of that?
5. The pine tree, the witch’s house, the Sabre jet marked “FA-57,” and the drive-in caves all go on Mike’s list of “things that don’t belong.” Why do these places matter so much to the boys?
6. No driver stops for the boys on Mount Vernon. The narrator imagines them later telling the story “with a slant to explain why they couldn’t help.” Is that fair? Have you ever been one of those drivers?
7. Sergeant Martinez “knows” that Mike will turn out to be a bad seed. Were you tempted to agree with him at this point in the book?
8. Buck pretends to leave for the drive-in and lets the boys believe they are alone with a ghost. Then he comes back, and “all is well with the world again.” How do you see Buck by this point in the story?

Chapter 7: Diamonds and Ditches

July 1964

What happens: Left in the car outside the White Front store, Mike breaks out the back windows with a hammer to make "diamonds" for his brothers. Jimmy can't keep the secret. The family visits the grandparents' farm in Indiana, with fireflies by the thousand. On the drive home they stop for the night near Provo, Utah, where Davey falls into a rain-swollen irrigation ditch. Mike runs for Dad while Jerry lies on a footbridge and holds on to his baby brother until Dad arrives.

For discussion

1. Mike breaks the windows so he can share a fortune with his brothers. How can the same boy want to hurt his brothers one moment and make them rich the next?
2. Jimmy, holding the glass up to the light and singing "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," can't resist saying, "I'm rich." What did you enjoy about this scene?
3. On the Indiana farm the boys run barefoot, milk cows, and chase fireflies, and feel "more alive than they ever have before." Why do you think these stretches of open country matter in the book?
4. Little Davey, the happy one, secretly bops his brothers with his bottle, and Buck mutters, "Way to go Davey." What did this moment add to your picture of the family?
5. At the ditch, Mike runs for help and Jerry holds on. Each brother does a different part. What does this rescue show about how the boys have changed since the lighter fluid?
6. With his arm giving out, Jerry cries, "Oh God. Please help. Oh God, please help me." Come back to this scene after you finish the book. How does the ending change it?
7. "He'd go down the hole." Mike runs over the hill and the water never comes back up. How did that discovery land for you?

Chapter 8: Magic Places

August 1964 to the summer of 1965

What happens: For his sixth birthday Mike chooses Disneyland. On Rocket to the Moon he panics because they have left Davey behind on Earth. A year later, as the family prepares to move to Rialto, Mike corners Jerry on the playhouse roof. Jerry steps aside and Mike falls onto the wall and the bikes, laying open his chin. For the first time Mike is afraid he can die, and he begins to question why he does what he does. A white crape myrtle and a red cardinal appear in the back yard, and the family flies kites in the Santa Ana wind.

For discussion

1. On Rocket to the Moon, Mike stands and shouts, "We left Davey on earth! We have to go back!" What does his panic reveal about how he has come to feel about his family?
2. Jerry sidesteps "like a matador," and Mike falls. Why does it take nearly dying for Mike to begin "questioning why he does the things he does"?
3. "There is no instantaneous transformation of Mike's thought process." Why do you think the author chose slow change instead of a sudden turnaround?

4. Glenda realizes Mike “has built the machine” that will keep the boys wrestling and fighting for years. Is that despair, realism, or something else?
5. Earlier, a white crape myrtle and a red cardinal stood outside Emma’s house. Here they return in the Barnett back yard, and Mike slips his hand into his mother’s. What do they mean to you now?
6. At the kite flying, Jimmy loses his spool. Buck could punish him, but instead he hands the spool to Glenda with a small smile. What has changed in Buck?

Chapter 9: Final Departures

Read this section after you finish the book. It discusses the ending.

What happens: The watchers reveal who they are: angels, sent to protect the family and to save Mike from himself, and through him the family. They were forbidden to interfere directly and could only nudge and whisper. Seeing that Mike’s heart has begun to change, most of them return home. Two stay behind, and little Davey, who can see them, smiles.

For discussion

1. Did you suspect who the watchers were? Go back to one scene, perhaps the walnut tree, Mount Vernon, or the ditch, and read it again knowing the truth. What changes?
2. The angels could only “gently nudge, or alter,” and Mike “totally ignored our voices” most of the time. What does the book suggest about free will and God’s protection?
3. “The fallen one had targeted Mike to be his weapon.” Does seeing Mike’s darkness as part of a spiritual battle excuse him, explain him, or something else?
4. The angels whispered to Buck, “Don’t punish Jimmy today…fly kites and be close to God,” and to Glenda, “Look at how beautiful your children are while they sleep.” Have you ever felt a nudge like that?
5. Two watchers stay behind because “evil is constantly on the prowl.” Why do you think the author ended with watchfulness instead of “happily ever after”?
6. Only Davey, the smallest child, can see the watchers. Why do you think the author gave him that gift?
7. “The beauty and safety of Eden was fading for the family. God has restored Eden to the family by his grace.” What is the Eden of the title? Has it truly been restored?

Big-Picture Questions

For your last meeting, or to close a single discussion of the whole book.

1. Eden Fading is inspired by the author's own childhood, and Mike is Michael Barnett himself. How does knowing that change the way you read Mike? What do you think it took to write about himself this honestly?
2. Follow Jerry from the first page to the last: follower, partner, escape artist, rescuer. How does he grow, and what does he teach his older brother?
3. Compare Glenda and Buck as parents. Where did you see love in each of them, even at their worst moments?
4. Discipline in the book includes belts, straps, a locked bedroom, and a neighborhood spanking. How should we read these scenes, as readers in their own time and as readers today?
5. The book is full of 1960s detail: cars and the songs on their radios, Tennessee Tuxedo and The Outer Limits, S&H Green Stamps, the Circle K, the drive-in. What memories did it stir for you?
6. How did the narrator, the unseen watchers who are not allowed to step in, affect your experience of the story? Was it comforting, frustrating, or both?
7. Is Mike redeemed by the end of the book, or only beginning? What signs of change do you see, and when did you first notice them?
8. The epigraph says, "The approaching disaster pulls us; draws us, like ants to a flame." How do ants, fire, and sacrifice echo through the whole book?
9. Which scene will stay with you longest, and why?

Thank You for Reading

If your group enjoyed Eden Fading, a short review on Amazon or Goodreads helps other readers find it. You can watch the book trailer and learn about Michael's other books at michaelbarnettbooks.com.