

## Readers' Guide

# *Essential Saroyan*

Edited, with a foreword by William E. Justice

### Timeline

This outline of notable events will help you put *Essential Saroyan* in context.

- 1890-1915 In the Ottoman Empire, oppression and government-sanctioned violence leads to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Armenians.
- 1905 Armenak Saroyan immigrates to New Jersey. His family, including his wife Takooni, soon joins him and they move to Fresno, California.
- 1908 William Saroyan is born in Fresno, California, on August 31.
- 1911 Armenak dies of a burst appendix. Takooni puts their four children in an orphanage in Oakland, California.
- 1914 World War I begins.
- 1915 Armenian Genocide. The Turkish government kills 1.5 million Armenians (80 percent of the population) in massacres, forced marches, and concentration camps.
- 1916 The Saroyan children move back to Fresno to live with Takooni.
- 1918 World War I ends. The Independent Republic of Armenia is established.
- 1920 The Soviet army annexes Armenia.
- 1934 *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze*, Saroyan's first short story collection, is published.
- 1935 Saroyan travels to Armenia and Russia.
- 1939 World War II begins. *The Time of Your Life* opens on Broadway.
- 1940 *The Time of Your Life* wins the Pulitzer Prize for drama. Saroyan refuses the award.
- 1941 The United States enters World War II.
- 1942 Saroyan is drafted into the U.S. Army. *The Human Comedy* is published. The film, produced by MGM, wins four Oscars.

- 1943 Saroyan marries Carol Marcus. Aram Saroyan is born on September 24.
- 1945 World War II ends.
- 1946 Lucy Saroyan is born on January 16. *The Adventures of Wesley Jackson* is published.
- 1949 Saroyan and Carol divorce.
- 1951 *Rock Wagram* is published. Saroyan and Carol remarry.
- 1952 *The Bicycle Rider in Beverly Hills* is published. Saroyan and Carol divorce.
- 1970 *Days of Life and Death and Escape to the Moon* is published.
- 1979 *Obituaries* is published.
- 1981 Saroyan dies of cancer in Fresno on May 19.

### Questions to Discuss

1. In the introduction, Saroyan is called a “poet of adolescence.” What does this mean?
2. “The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze” was Saroyan's first famous story, as well as the title of his first anthology. How does the style of this work—including sentence structure, tone, and plot—fit with the style of his later work? What is it about Saroyan's talent that allows him to write in so many different styles?
3. Most of Saroyan's tales are about the working-class immigrant communities of his childhood rather than the well-traveled and wealthy people he knew as a grown man. Why do you think this is so? Can you think of any authors today who follow the same pattern?
4. In the first paragraph of “Seventy Thousand Assyrians,” Saroyan writes, “I am writing a serious story, perhaps one of the most serious I shall ever write. That is why I am being flippant.” What does he mean?
5. Do you agree with Saroyan's assessment of nationality in “Antranik of Armenia” when he argues that it is “idiocy”? The story was written in 1938; was Saroyan prescient about what would happen in World War II?
6. In your mind, what do the miscommunications between Tracy and the tiger represent? What about miscommunications between Tracy and the other humans around him?
7. What role does World War II play in *The Human Comedy* and *The Adventures of Wesley Jackson*? How does Saroyan's view of World War II compare to the views of that war in the popular media today?

8. Saroyan felt insecure about his lack of formal education. How does he address this insecurity in pieces like "The Theological Student" and "A Writer's Declaration"?

### **Suggested Reading**

Balakian, Nona. *The World of William Saroyan*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1998.

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Leggett, John. *A Daring Young Man: A Biography of William Saroyan*. New York: Knopf, 2002.

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