

**TWO TRAINS RUNNING**  
by **ANDREW VACHSS**  
**Reading Group Guide**

**About this Guide:**

Known for writing works of crime fiction that reveal so much truth that they have been dubbed “investigative novels,” Andrew Vachss presents his stunning new novel, *TWO TRAINS RUNNING*. Set in the fall of 1959, *TWO TRAINS RUNNING* exposes the world of Locke City, an old “company town” that survives on vice tourism. It is a world run by Royal Beaumont—a man who holds no elected office, and yet controls the town. Set against the backdrop of recognizable American history, *TWO TRAINS RUNNING* illuminates the challenge of Royal’s organization by a Mafia kingpin and an Irish boss; juvenile gangs locked in violent struggles over abandoned lots; a black revolutionary movement; a neo-Nazi group preparing for race war; and the infiltration of the FBI into all aspects of American society.

Powerful and thrilling, dazzling in its originality, this new book is at once a masterful crime novel and an epic story of postwar America.

**For Discussion:**

1. *Two Trains Running* is structured in short segments, each marked with the date and military time. What effect does this organization have on your experience of the story? What kind of mood does it create, and how does that relate to the narrative?
2. Walker understands that Luther is “kin,” not because of blood but because, as Royal states, of “what he’s done. By what he’d do. And what I’d do, too.” There are few hints of traditional families in *Two Trains Running*, yet many “family” units. Even the FBI states that it “takes care of its own.” What families are there and how are they formed? What holds them together and breaks them apart? What does the idea of family mean to each group?
3. Locke City is the epitome of a rough-and-tumble man’s world. Tussy, Ruth, Cynthia, Kitty and Rosa Mae are the only female characters, each connected to a different love story. What are those stories and what are the women’s roles? How do they embody character traits such as loyalty, honor, love, and trust—and does their demonstration of these traits differ from the men in the story? Trust is a key concept in the story; Sherman tells Ruth that she is “the person I trust. The only one.” Walker tells Tussy she is the “pure woman” he’s been looking for. What is the role of trust in the book? Trust between men and women? Between men? Between bosses and underlings?

4. The main action in *Two Trains Running* swirls around the maneuverings of the three centers of power in Locke City: Royal Beaumont, Sal Dioguardi, and Mickey Shalare. At the edges are the press and the law, represented by Proctor and Sherman Layne. What is the place of these two men in the story? The press, in the person of Proctor, seems to represent the last vestige of anti-corruption in the story—what is society’s relationship to that truth-telling? How is “truth” presented in the book—for example, in the story of Al Capone’s death?
5. The question of motivation lingers around all actions we take. Consider questions of self-preservation, dignity, greed, power, desire, jealousy, and history. How similar/dissimilar are the motivations of characters such as Rufus and Carl, Shalare and Beaumont, Proctor and Walker?
6. It is difficult to define crime in a world in which corruption overshadows every action. The FBI agents at one point joke that the organizations they infiltrate would collapse if the agents pulled out, since they are the ones who pay their dues. Shalare justifies his actions by emphasizing a higher political purpose; Rufus justifies his by focusing on enormous racial injustices in America. Do any definitions of crime arise in the book, and what are they? Is there a “code of honor” for any of the characters? How do you interpret Walker’s story at the end, in which he explains what he does by stating that “It doesn’t matter who hires me, because they’re all guilty or they’re all being used by those who are”?
7. Several characters lead hidden lives, or keep part of their lives secret: Rufus, Carl, Walker, Harley. Others are underestimated by society: Holden, Luther, Moses. What do these characters suggest about our ability to know each other? Do we see in others what we want to believe, and how does that affect our actions? How is role-playing used by different characters, and for what ends?
8. The image of a train is used by both Royal Beaumont and Walker Dett. Royal remarks, “We’re riding the train, all right. But we’re passengers, not the conductor.” The grandmother who shelters Walker tells him, “Two trains coming, son. Headed for the junction. You can’t stop either one. But you can slow the dark one down. You can put a log across the tracks, make Satan late enough that the righteous one gets by clean.” What do the trains of the title represent for Royal and Walker? How are they connected to a larger view of society and history?
9. *Two Trains Running* ends explosively, with the destruction of people and possibility. Throughout the story, there has been a symbolic passing down of power to a younger generation. What does this ending illustrate about human nature? What does it suggest about the future?

**Suggested Reading:**

Joe R. Lansdale, *The Bottoms*; Pete Dexter, *Train*; James Ellroy, *L.A. Confidential*; T.C. Boyle, *World's End*; Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*; Michael Patrick McDonald, *All Souls*; Dashiell Hammett's *Red Harvest*.

**Author Biography:**

Andrew Vachss has been a federal investigator in sexually transmitted diseases, a social services caseworker, and a labor organizer, and has directed a maximum-security prison for youth offenders. Now a lawyer in private practice, he represents children and youths exclusively. He is the author of numerous novels, including the Burke series, and a wide variety of other material. His work has appeared in *Parade*, *Antaeus*, *Esquire*, *Playboy*, the *New York Times*, and numerous other forums. A native New Yorker, he now divides his time between the city of his birth and the Pacific Northwest. The dedicated Web site for Vachss and his work is [www.vachss.com](http://www.vachss.com).

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