

Reading Group Guide

1. John Clarke said many times, “We Clarkes were made for The River.” Later, Jacob tells Gabriel, “You were made for The River.” What does it mean to be made for The River? In what ways were *you* made for The River? How does that perspective change your outlook in life?
2. Gabriel battled fear and anxiety throughout his life. His fears came to a crescendo when Jimmy and the boys were going to jump off “the cliffs” and Gabriel couldn’t muster the courage to join, yet he was furious with himself for not going. Can you think of a time when you were fearful of something and simultaneously angry with yourself for being afraid? How did you move past it? Do you think Gabriel’s fears were justified?
3. The albino red-tailed hawk makes several appearances at key moments throughout the story. What do you think is the significance of this?
4. Gabriel finally expresses his rage at The River for taking his dad, shouting, “You did this!” How did this moment change things for Gabriel? Have you ever had anger rise up in you that you didn’t even know you were carrying? Have you experienced times in your life when you had to face your anger before you could move forward?

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5. Gabriel experiences The River rising up, submerging him, and carrying him. He hears a voice saying “I’ve always been with you,” and in the midst of this, Gabriel realizes the truth about his dad’s death—that John hadn’t intentionally abandoned Gabriel. Whom do you think is speaking to Gabriel here? Have you ever had a mystical experience like this that led you to new insights or profound change?
6. Tabitha tells Gabriel: “You can’t fully experience The River from the banks, Gabriel. You have to get in . . . all the way in.” How does this wisdom apply to your life? Can you think of a time when you were “standing on the banks” and needed the courage to get in? What happened, and how did it change you?
7. The first time Gabriel ran The River, he faced significant fears and finally felt “alive.” How does overcoming fear make you feel more alive? How does it change your outlook on life?
8. Tabitha tells Gabriel, “most people don’t take time to really *see* what’s all around them.” Have you ever been guilty of this? How can you make sure you’re “seeing” what’s around you? What’s the consequence if you don’t?
9. Gabriel was back in Cairo after his first river trip, and he realized how much he hated his dead-end job. The River had opened up a whole new world to him, and yet, “something was keeping him from taking that step of faith.” Why did Gabriel even hesitate to leave Cairo and join Tabitha at The River? What held him back? Can you relate?
10. Ezra is the wise older person who helps Gabriel understand himself and his history. Is there a person like this in your life? How have they contributed to your growth?
11. Gabriel’s grandfather wrote, “Life is not to be merely survived—it is meant to be lived.” Later Jacob tells Gabriel, “The River is more than a place, Gabriel. It’s a way of living—really living.” What does this mean to you? How does one “really live” and how does that differ from simply surviving?

Andy Andrews Interviews Michael Neale about *The River*

ANDY ANDREWS: Michael, *The River* is a beautiful story. As I was reading it, I kept thinking how hard it is to believe that this is your first book! Can you tell us how you were inspired to write *The River*?

MICHAEL NEALE: Wow, thank you, Andy! That means so much coming from you. I love rivers. I've rafted and fished in many of them over the years. One trip in particular with my wife, Leah, really opened my eyes and heart to the story of The River. We rafted through the beautiful gorges of Colorado and at one particularly treacherous spot—where, I might add, a man perished the week before—Leah fell out. She disappeared into

the whitewater. I felt so helpless. She was only under for probably 10-15 seconds but it felt like a lifetime. She was fine and she popped up downstream a bit and we finished our run. That day, a truly visceral experience was written on my soul. The river made a lasting impression. I started journaling my ideas through the years. The full inspiration was far more than that day on the river with Leah. The River and its characters came from a collection life experiences. Just over eleven years later, I finally got the courage to try and communicate a story that was stirring in my heart. The story would not let me go. It was almost as if the story chose me. I had to bring these characters to life!

AA: That line, “You were made for The River,” is just awesome. Folks really need to hear that, don’t they? That their destiny is important?

MN: I really do believe that, Andy. We are made for so much more than we often realize. There is a greater story unfolding. We all have a vital role to play. It is a thrilling adventure! We must not settle for what is simply familiar or safe. We cannot let our fear of the unknown hold us back. The only true joy and fulfillment in life comes from living out our purpose and destiny in the greater story of life, which I believe is God’s story. To live a life that is wide open, moving toward that purpose with everything we are, is the only way to live!

AA: I know that you are a career songwriter. You won a

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Dove, didn't you? How is the craft of songwriting different from writing a novel?

MN: I did win a Dove Award this year for the worship song, *Your Great Name*. It was very humbling. How is it different? Well, songwriting is so much smaller in terms of scope and content. It's like writing a paragraph or two and setting it to music. A song may have one hundred words, while a novel may have anywhere from 50,000-200,000 words. It was definitely a vastly different experience in terms of quantity of content. A song may take a few hours, a few days even. This book took me a solid year. Songwriting will always be a part of my life. Stories and Songs really, that's what I'm about. I'm learning to love new challenges, conquering new mountains. I was afraid of writing a book. It just seemed way too big. I'm glad I didn't let the fear keep me from doing it though. Once I learned to let go of trying to see the end from the beginning, it became an adventure to see where the characters took me. I just tried to listen well and do the hard work. I sought out some great mentors along the way too!

AA: Gabriel's healing ultimately takes place in the very spot where he was wounded as a child. It's about place, yes, but it's also about community in some ways, isn't it? I am big on the concept of community. How about you, Michael?

MN: Absolutely. We were not made to walk alone. We were made to journey together. Once Gabriel got a taste

of what it's like to belong, he couldn't go back to the isolation of Kansas. We need each other. To love and be loved, is the stuff of being alive. I love the fact that Gabriel experienced *The River* in the quiet places, by himself, but he was transformed along the journey with a band of friends. When I'm weak, I need another to help me go on. When someone else needs help, I need to get out of myself and do what I can to lift the load. Gabriel found that and so much more at *The River*.

AA: I enjoyed the character of Ezra. In fact, he reminds me of a character in one of my own books—Jones in *The Noticer*. What was the process of creating that character like? What does he do for the story?

MN: Ezra definitely seems to be a favorite among many readers . . . and for good reason. Ezra represents the perspective in life we all need. Ezra never judged Gabriel; he just covered him with good sense and timeless wisdom. His tone was steady and loving. Ezra played such a key role in Gabriel's processing of all that life had thrown at him. He helped Gabriel see the bigger picture. He helped him see that greatness and beauty come to us often times through our brokenness. He walked alongside him on the road to healing. All the while, he was a fantastic connection to Gabriel's heritage and who he was destined to be. I'm so grateful I've had a few "Ezra's" in my life. Some of them, I've sought out and asked them to help me process life's unexpected turns.

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AA: Your descriptions of Gabriel's state of mind as he grapples with his past, particularly his "dark place," are so powerful. How do you understand Gabriel's "dark place," and how does his relationship to The River help him to move beyond it?

MN: Dark times in life are inescapable. It feels like a turn that life wasn't supposed to take. It may be grief, shame, and illness, financial, relational, or otherwise. We all have those times . . . its part of the fabric of being broken people, living in a broken world. The good news is . . . it is not forever. The beauty and power of this story is not that The River pulled Gabriel out of the dark times forever and ever. It's that The River called to him and joined him in those hurtful dark places. Through people, through circumstance, through his personal and intimate encounters, The River called Gabriel to a new life. He didn't have to stay imprisoned to his fear and grief. He could journey on to new and beautiful horizons. Once he got a taste of what was to come with The River, Gabriel was changed forever. Gabriel did have a choice. He could have stayed in Kansas . . . but he didn't.

AA: I was captivated by how Gabriel's relationship with Tabitha develops and how she represents a world Gabriel doesn't even know he's been missing. It's really compelling when he finally discovers how she's connected to Gabriel's father. What can couples learn from this relationship?

MN: Tabitha is not only a big part of helping Gabriel conquer his fears, but she is instrumental in Gabriel wading through the unforgiveness and resentment he didn't even know he carried. I think couples can learn a lot from Gabriel and Tabitha. True love can and will bring out the very best in us. There will be struggle though. Gabriel had so much to work through and Tabitha represented a seemingly unattainable life of freedom and love. The biggest thing is, there can be unexpected surprises in our relationships. For Gabriel, it was finding out who Tabitha's father was. The only way home for Gabriel was down the path of forgiveness, at The River.

AA: There are journal entries spaced throughout the book. How did the idea to include passages from John's journals come about, and what would you say the journal means to Gabriel's journey?

MN: The Journal becomes Gabriel's constant companion. It's his guide, his wisdom, his connection to his history, and a light to the path of his future as a river guide. In addition to direct messages from his father and grandfather, it contained "the ways of The River." My grandfather passed away a few years back. I was very close to him. Before he died, he gave me a large spiral-bound notebook full of as many memories of his life as he could muster to the page. I loved having that window into his life. I also am so very thankful for the spiritual letters that have been left for us all in the Holy Bible. It's

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a journal really, God's thoughts and His interaction with people throughout history. It's His story, and I love it that we can mine its inexhaustible treasures. It's our connection to relationship with Him and His destiny for us.

AA: What are your aspirations for readers of *The River*? What do you hope that they take away from Gabriel's story?

MN: I hope and pray the story and its characters take hold of people. More importantly, I pray *The River* takes hold of their hearts. I want people to know they are not alone in their grief and suffering. I want them to know that beauty can rise from the ashes of brokenness. I want people to seize a life of purpose and destiny that is waiting for them. I want them to live for something greater than the here and now. I want them to experience all The River has to offer.



Michael Neale, Author

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