



## WHY AM I READING THIS BOOK?

Lasting works of humor shed light on the human condition and cause us to see old subjects in new ways. When conventions and rules become so familiar as to seem natural and inevitable, a humorist reminds us that the rules can crumble and be remade. Erma Bombeck explodes the myth of the happy housewife. Charles Dickens finds human sympathy in a tight-fisted moneylender. Brady Udall reveals the anxieties and aspirations of adults and children in a polygamous home. The books in this category cause us to pause in our laughter and think again about something we thought we understood: marriage and family life, race, war, the afterlife, and even the Holocaust! Books are drawn from the last two centuries and from the present, showing how the best laughter transcends its moment and forges communities of understanding across continents, generations, and cultures.

## Book List

1. *A Christmas Carol*, Charles Dickens
2. *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller\*
3. *Food: A Love Story*, Jim Gaffigan
4. *Forever Erma*, Erma Bombeck
5. *Green Grass, Running Water*, Thomas King
6. *Hope: A Tragedy*, Shalom Auslander
7. *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, Savid Sedaris
8. *Messages From My Father*, Calvin Trillin
9. *Pride and Prejudice*, Jane Austen

10. *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, Mark Twain
11. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, Sherman Alexie
12. *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Oscar Wilde
13. *The Skyscraper That Flew and Other Stories*, Jesús Salvador Treviño
14. *Where'd You Go, Bernadette?*, Maria Semple

\**Catch-22* and *The Lonely Polygamist* are longer than average LTAI books. These titles are recommended for programs that allow a month between sessions.

# Book Summaries

## A Christmas Carol

*A Christmas Carol* is a novella by English author Charles Dickens first published by Chapman & Hall on December 19, 1843. The story tells of sour and stingy Ebenezer Scrooge's ideological, ethical, and emotional transformation after the supernatural visits of Jacob Marley and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet to Come. The novella met with instant success and critical acclaim. The book was written and published in early Victorian era Britain when it was experiencing a nostalgic interest in its forgotten Christmas traditions, and at the time when new customs such as the Christmas tree and greeting cards were being introduced. Dickens' sources for the tale appear to be many and varied but are principally the humiliating experiences of his childhood, his sympathy for the poor, and various Christmas stories and fairy tales. The tale has been viewed by critics as an indictment of 19th-century industrial capitalism. It has been credited with restoring the holiday to one of merriment and festivity in Britain and America after a period of sobriety and somberness. *A Christmas Carol* remains popular, has never been out of print, and has been adapted to film, stage, opera, and other media.

## About the Author

Dickens was born on February 7, 1812, the son of a clerk at the Navy Pay Office. His father, John Dickens, continually living beyond his means, was imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea in 1824. Twelve-year-old Charles was removed from school and sent to work at a boot-blackening factory, earning six shillings a week to help support the family. This dark experience cast a shadow over the clever, sensitive boy that became a defining experience in his life; he would later write that he wondered "how I could have been so easily cast away at such an age." This childhood poverty and feelings of abandonment, although unknown to his readers until after his death, would be a heavy influence on Dickens' later views on social reform and the world he would create through his fiction. Dickens would go on to write 15 major novels and countless short stories and articles before his death on June 9, 1870. He wished to be buried, without fanfare, in a small cemetery in Rochester, but the Nation would not allow it. He was laid to rest in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, flowers from thousands of mourners overflowing the open grave. Among the more beautiful bouquets were many simple clusters of wildflowers, wrapped in rags.

## Discussion Questions for A Christmas Carol

1. If you are familiar with this story from film or television, how did the novel meet your expectations, and how did it surprise you?
2. Mark Twain would surely say that Dickens is among the humorists who “preach” in this novel. Jacob Marley articulates a widely accepted Christian principle of the nineteenth century when he says to Scrooge: “... any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness.” Is this principle still accepted today? If so, how might one rephrase it for today’s understanding? If not, why does this story continue to charm and delight so many, if a key theme seems out of date?
3. How does Dickens make Scrooge a partly sympathetic character? Why, given the overall themes of the book, might he have done that?
2. What is wrong with Scrooge at the start of the book (many dimensions)? How is that related to his calling Christmas a “humbug” (scam)?
3. It is easy to find passages in which the diction of this novel seems dated to a modern reader. Did this diction make the novel difficult to read or understand? Does the diction add to the pleasure of the novel?
4. What makes this novel funny? Does humor make the “preaching” more successful? Why has the novel outlasted Twain’s prediction of 30 years for humor or for preaching?

## Catch-22

*Catch-22* is like no other novel. It is one of the funniest books ever written, a keystone work in American literature, and even added a new term to the dictionary.

At the heart of *Catch-22* resides the incomparable, malingering bombardier, Yossarian, a hero endlessly inventive in his schemes to save his skin from the horrible chances of war. His efforts are perfectly understandable because as he furiously scrambles, thousands of people he hasn't even met are trying to kill him. His problem is Colonel Cathcart, who keeps raising the number of missions the men must fly to complete their service. Yet if Yossarian makes any attempts to excuse himself from the perilous missions that he is committed to flying, he is trapped by the Great Loyalty Oath Crusade, the hilariously sinister bureaucratic rule from which the book takes its title: a man is considered insane if he willingly continues to fly dangerous combat missions, but if he makes the necessary formal request to be relieved of such missions, the very act of making the request proves that he is sane and therefore ineligible to be relieved. *Catch-22* is a microcosm of the twentieth-century world as it might look to someone dangerously sane -- a masterpiece of our time.

### About the Author

The Brooklyn-born Heller graduated high school in 1941 and enlisted in the Army Air Force within a year after the United States entered World War II. He was eventually trained as a bombardier, and in 1944 was sent to Corsica, where he flew sixty missions. After the war Heller attended New York University on the GI bill and then got a master's degree in English from Columbia. He went on to Oxford as a Fulbright scholar, and held various jobs before publishing a few short stories in *Esquire* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. One of these stories provided the seed for *Catch-22*. Heller wrote five additional novels, including *Something Happened* (1974), *Good As Gold* (1979), and *Closing Time* (1994), a sequel to *Catch-22*, as well as short stories, plays, screenplays, and the 1998 memoir *Now and Then*.

## Discussion Questions for *Catch-22*

1. To what extent is this novel about war, or World War II? To what extent is it about human nature?
2. In chapter 21, Colonel Cathcart thinks about the “subversive” and “alien” sound of the name “Yossarian,” compared with the “clean, crisp, honest American names” like his own, and the names Peckem and Dreedle. Describe the relationship between names and characters in this book.
3. What attitude(s) does this novel take toward death and the characters who die?
4. Who is the soldier in white? What role does he play? Why is Dunbar so agitated about him in the chapter called “Thanksgiving,” and why is Dunbar’s action so unacceptable to authorities?
5. *Catch-22* does not proceed chronologically. How would you describe the arrangement of chapters? What does this arrangement contribute to the book? How do you know when time passes in the story? Can you account for the novel’s seemingly unpredictable use of time, sometimes moving forward, sometimes moving backward, at various speeds?
6. Why won’t Nately’s girlfriend/Nately’s whore feel ashamed? What do you think of the way this novel portrays women?
7. *Catch-22* was well received upon publication in 1961, and in its first two years, boosted by paperback sales, it had sold some two million copies. Why do you think the novel was so successful?
8. What does this novel satirize? What makes it funny? Do members of your discussion group agree about what makes the novel funny?
9. What is the message of the eternal city in the chapter of that name?
10. Are you satisfied by the conclusion? Why or why not?

## **Food: A Love Story**

Have you ever finished a meal that tasted horrible but not noticed until the last bit? Eaten in your car so you wouldn't have to share with your children? Gotten hungry while watching a dog food commercial? Does the presence of green vegetables make you angry? If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are pretty pathetic, but you are not alone. Feast along with America's favorite food comedian, best-selling author, and male supermodel Jim Gaffigan as he digs into his specialty: stuffing his face. *Food: A Love Story* is an in-depth, thoroughly uninformed look at everything from health food to things that people actually enjoy eating. Jim Gaffigan reveals his most intimate food memories, opinions, and fantasies that will keep you laughing all the way to the refrigerator.

## **Author Information**

Jim Gaffigan is a New York Times bestselling author, comedian, and actor who only wishes he was as thin as the cake-topper groom on the cover of the book. When he is not eating in airports before flying to some city to eat and do stand-up comedy, he overeats in New York City and also lives there with his five young children and much smarter and thinner wife, Jeannie.

## Discussion Questions for Food: A Love Story

1.

## Forever Erma

Erma Bombeck's own aversion to producing books of column collections over the years made the family and publisher of the hardcover *Forever, Erma* apprehensive about its public acceptance. The public proved Erma's misgivings were unfounded. Within nine weeks of the publication date, the book had climbed to number three on *The New York Times* best-seller list. It remained on the list for a total of fifteen weeks. Over 400,000 copies had been bought by her loyalists and their friends and families. Only the emotional spectrum of this book matches its topical diversity. One's feelings are reminiscent of the same warmth and tenderness only Erma could portray, and readers will be delighted to find their favorite selections. Included with 188 other columns are her first, "Children Cornering the Coin Market," from January 1965, and her last one, "Let's Face It," from April 1996. Readers around the world loved Erma Bombeck and cherished every one of her columns. As Phil Donahue said, "We shall never see the likes of her again. She was real and she brought us down to earth—gently, generously, and with brilliant humor. When the scholars gather hundreds of years from now to learn about us, they can't know it all if they don't read Erma."

## About the Author

Erma Louise Fiste was born on February 21, 1927, in Dayton, Ohio. Erma Bombeck found the humor in the everyday experiences of being a wife and mother and shared it with her readers. But her early days were no laughing matter. Bombeck lost her father at the age of nine and her mother went to work to support them. She worked for the Dayton Herald as a copygirl as a teenager and got her first article published while she was still in high school. After graduating in 1944, she joined the publication's writing staff and saved money for college. Bombeck graduated from the University of Dayton in 1949 and returned to the Journal-Herald. That same year, she married Bill Bombeck. Around this time, she also started writing for the paper's women's section. The Bombecks started a family in 1953 when they adopted a daughter, Betsy. Bombeck stopped working briefly, but soon returned to writing. She found much inspiration in her roles as mother and wife. The Bombeck family continued to grow during the 1950s with the addition of two sons; Andrew in 1955 and Matthew in 1958. Already known for her keen wit and humorous observations, Bombeck's career as a humorist really began to take off in the mid-1960s. Entitled "At Wit," her column found humor in some of the headaches associated with motherhood and family life and developed quite a following. Erma Bombeck died April 22, 1996, from medical complications related to her kidney transplant.

## Discussion Questions for Forever Erma

1. In literary study, often we privilege longer works – novels, full-length plays, collections of poems and stories – over shorter ones. Does the brevity of Bombeck's essays affect your sense of their value or importance?

2. Of the many short sketches in this collection, take a moment to notice which ones are most vivid and memorable for you. Share these choices with your discussion group and notice a few things about your group's choices:

a. Which *situations* are most vivid and memorable for your group? Why?

b. When does Bombeck's *language* help to make a sketch most vivid or memorable?

c. Do you tend to remember Bombeck's *scenes* in your mind's eye, her *ways of saying things*, or both? What examples come to mind?

3. Like Mark Twain and other literary celebrities before her, Erma Bombeck was tremendously successful in her lifetime. Only three weeks after she began writing her humorous newspaper columns in 1965, Bombeck became nationally syndicated. In 1978, she negotiated a one million dollar contract for one of her books. In the 1980s, between her columns, books, lectures, and TV appearances, she sometimes earned as much in a year. Yet financial success is not the same as literary success, and some literary celebrities fade quickly. Does Bombeck's work have lasting value, or is it a product of its moment?

4. Many of Bombeck's sketches find humor in family life. What does she find funniest about family life? Most challenging? Do you find these situations funny or challenging, too?

5. Autobiographical writers in any genre face the problem of how to balance honesty with respect and privacy for family members or others mentioned in a literary work. Does Bombeck provide privacy or dignity for her actual husband or children? Are you comfortable with the way she writes about her family? Why or why not?

## **Green Grass, Running Water**

Green Grass, Running Water is a multi-faceted story—part myth, part hilariously off-kilter reality—of contemporary Native experience as it merges and crosses the realities of modern North American life. It is the story of five Blackfoot Indians who live in Blossom, Alberta, or on its nearby reserve. Although they live seemingly separate lives, their existences are connected in ways that are at once coincidental, comical and cosmic. Alberta, a university professor who wants a child but not the trappings of husband and marriage, finds herself involved with not one, but two men, who pull her into their opposing orbits: Charlie the flashy and ambitious big city lawyer, and Lionel, the local TV salesman, self-effacing to the point of near-erasure. Latisha, Lionel's sister and guerrilla marketing whiz, runs the Dead Dog Café, a local hangout named for its mythic culinary delights, much to the titillation of gullible tourists who take it to be the simple truth. And then there's Eli, who left Blossom to seek a professorship in Toronto, only to find his destiny in a tiny streamside cabin. Green Grass, Running Water is a rich tale, weaving subtle, magical humor, revisionist history, muted nostalgia and complex humanity into one bright, whole cloth. Funny, provocative and illuminating, Green Grass, Running Water involves itself with many of the major questions which face contemporary Native North Americans. It also reminds us of three essential things: the vibrancy of stories, the need for balance, and the transformative capacities of language and people.

## **About the Author**

Thomas King was born in 1943 in Sacramento, California, and is of Cherokee, Greek and German descent. He obtained his Ph.D from the University of Utah in 1986. He is known for works in which he addresses the marginalization of American Indians, delineates "pan-Indian" concerns and histories, and attempts to abolish common stereotypes about Native Americans. He taught Native American Studies at the University of Lethbridge in Alberta, Canada, and at the University of Minnesota. He is currently a Professor of English at the University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada. King has become one of the foremost writers of fiction about Canada's Native people.

## Discussion Questions for *Green Grass, Running Water*

1. You may find the structure of the book perplexing at first. At what point do you see the multiple storylines coming together? How would you explain the structure of the novel?
2. Which storyline is funniest – the love triangle between Alberta, Lionel and Charlie; the escape of four old Indians from a mental hospital and their pursuit; the entry of the four old Indians into the world and their renaming; the convergence of all the plots on the Sun Dance; Eli's resistance to the Grand Baleen Dam; the narrator's attempts to get Coyote to listen to the story? Do members of your discussion group find humor in the same parts of the story? Where does some prior knowledge help with the humor, and where is it widely accessible?
3. Is one plotline more important than the others? Why or why not?
4. Are the four old Indians male or female? Does this matter? To what degree is gender important in this novel?
5. *Green Grass, Running Water* has been praised for its synthesis of oral and literary traditions and of Judeo-Christian and Native mythologies. Where do you find Native and Judeo-Christian traditions influencing each other in the novel, and what is the result? Where do oral story techniques matter (i.e., repetition and other structures that aid memory, speaking words and names aloud to hear meaning)?
6. What does the title *Green Grass, Running Water* refer to?
7. Why does the novel make so much of Hollywood westerns? What does it mean to say that they are all the same?
8. "All this water imagery must mean something," says Coyote, a few sections into part four. Does it?
9. What role does Coyote play in the novel? Describe the relationship between Coyote and the unnamed "I" narrator. What is our relation – the readers' relation – to the story?

10. The novel is full of literary and historical allusions. What do they add, besides humor? One of the more sustained allusions is to a story by Herman Melville entitled “Benito Cereno.” If you have an opportunity to read that story about an eighteenth-century ship carrying a cargo of African slaves, you’ll gain insight into the character Babo. (In Melville’s story, Babo – a male and a slave – is the personal assistant to captain Benito Cereno. His responsibilities include shaving the captain with a straight blade – a job that alarms the American captain Amasa Delano when he visits Cereno’s ship. The full-text story is available on multiple free internet sites such as Electronic Scholarly Publishing, Online Great Books in English, The Literature Network.) If you have read Melville’s “Benito Cereno,” how does it help you to make sense of Babo’s interrogation, her relationship to Dr. Joe Hovaugh, and her relationship to the old Indians?

11. Are the endings satisfying? Consider what becomes of the Blossom characters, the characters associated with the mental institution, and Coyote. Are there other endings to consider?

12. The novel has a great deal to say about Indian-white relations. What other themes seem important to you?

## Hope: A Tragedy

*Hope: A Tragedy* is a rambling, quasi-philosophical comedy about a young Jewish business writer and his family who buy a house in rural New York. They find that their purchase has included a whole lot more than they bargained for. The protagonist, Solomon Kugel, discovers there's a secret tenant in the attic – none other than Holocaust writer-victim Anne Frank. The iconic Anne Frank, now very old, miraculously survived the Nazi death camps and took up residence in this bucolic enclave, camping in Kugel's attic and writing a book about her life.

Kugel targets, in scattergun fashion, all sorts of social worries, such as anti-Semitism, and oddities from gluten allergies to the tanning fad to the real estate business. He works up his biggest sweat, though, about Anne Frank hiding out in his attic. The novel itself glides smoothly along, strongly out Woody-ing Woody Allen in its constant fretfulness, and utterly charming in its wacky devotion to the main character's abiding doubts and darkest fears.

## About the Author

Shalom Auslander was raised as an Orthodox Jew in Spring Valley, New York. Nominated for the Koret Award for writers under thirty-five, he has published stories and articles in *Esquire*, *The New Yorker*, and *The New York Times Magazine*, as well as on [nerve.com](http://nerve.com) and [nextbook.org](http://nextbook.org). He is a regular contributor to PRI's "This American Life." His first book, the short story collection *Beware of God*, was published to critical acclaim in 2005. He lives with his wife and son near Woodstock, New York. Much of his work can be read and heard at [shalomauslander.com](http://shalomauslander.com).

## Discussion Questions for *Hope: A Tragedy*

1. Why is this novel subtitled a tragedy? Is it a tragedy, according to your understanding of that genre? Do you find it funny? Can it be both tragic and funny?
2. “*Why do people suffer?*” is an age-old question. How many different answers does this novel consider? (Consider, perhaps, how different characters in the novel would answer the question.) Does one answer emerge as more plausible than the rest?
3. Is Solomon Kugel too hopeful?
4. What do Kugel and his wife hope will change when they move to the country? What happens to their hope?
5. The well-read Kugel often thinks of his life in literary terms. He wonders if he can depend, as Blanche DuBois claims to do in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, “on the kindness of strangers.” He is preoccupied for a time with Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka’s “The Metamorphosis,” who wakes up one day and finds that he has metamorphosed from a human into a beetle. Philosophers and Holocaust writers frame his thoughts. He seems to have read nearly everything...except *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Does reading help him face his problems?
6. Perhaps the most important literary source for this novel is Voltaire’s *Candide*, a satire of eighteenth-century optimistic philosophy represented by Pangloss, who teaches Candide that he lives in the “best of all possible worlds.” In *Candide*, as in *Hope: A Tragedy*, comedy and tragedy mingle continuously as characters wonder if everything happens for a reason and why people suffer. Candide, perhaps like Kugel, finds utopia (El Dorado) but does not choose to stay. Is it human nature, as Pinkus argues, to look for suffering? If you have time to read *Candide* after finishing *Hope: A Tragedy*, do you see other parallels between the two books? In what manner, and to what end, does Auslander take up Voltaire’s philosophical questions?
7. Compare and contrast the truths preached by Professor Jove and Pinkus. Who is right?
8. The publisher has chosen to illustrate the cover with a deer. What happens between Kugel and a deer, and why is it important?
9. How does the novel challenge conventional views of the Holocaust and genocide? What role does humor play in changing our vision of history in this novel? Is humor important for survival? What makes a survivor?
10. Are there themes in this novel that apply to contemporary life in the American West, a landscape that historian Frederick Jackson Turner and author Wallace Stegner have influentially described – in Stegner’s words – as a “geography of hope”?

## Me Talk Pretty One Day

Sedaris is Garrison Keillor's evil twin: like the Minnesota humorist, Sedaris (Naked) focuses on the icy patches that mar life's sidewalk, though the ice in his work is much more slippery and the falls much more spectacularly funny than in Keillor's. Many of the 27 short essays collected here (which appeared originally in the New Yorker, Esquire and elsewhere) deal with his father, Lou, to whom the book is dedicated. Lou is a micromanager who tries to get his uninterested children to form a jazz combo and, when that fails, insists on boosting David's career as a performance artist by heckling him from the audience. Sedaris suggests that his father's punishment for being overly involved in his kids' artistic lives is David's brother Paul, otherwise known as "The Rooster," a half-literate miscreant whose language is outrageously profane. Sedaris also writes here about the time he spent in France and the difficulty of learning another language. After several extended stays in a little Norman village and in Paris, Sedaris had progressed, he observes, "from speaking like an evil baby to speaking like a hillbilly. 'Is them the thoughts of cows?' I'd ask the butcher, pointing to the calves' brains displayed in the front window." But in English, Sedaris is nothing if not nimble: in one essay he goes from his cat's cremation to his mother's in a way that somehow manages to remain reverent to both of the departed. "Reliable sources" have told Sedaris that he has "tended to exhaust people," and true to form, he will exhaust readers of this new book, too, with helpless laughter. 16-city author tour. Copyright 2000 Reed Business Information, Inc. (Amazon)

## About the Author

With sardonic wit and incisive social critiques, David Sedaris has become one of America's pre-eminent humor writers. The great skill with which he slices through cultural euphemisms and political correctness proves that Sedaris is a master of satire and one of the most observant writers addressing the human condition today. David Sedaris is the author of the bestsellers *Barrel Fever* and *Holidays on Ice*, as well as collections of personal essays, *Naked*, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, and *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim*, each of which became immediate bestsellers. There are a total of seven million copies of his books in print and they have been translated into 25 languages. He is the editor of an anthology of stories, *Children Playing Before a Statue of Hercules: An Anthology of Outstanding Stories*. His essays appear regularly in *Esquire* and *The New Yorker*. Sedaris and his sister, Amy Sedaris, have collaborated under the name "The Talent Family" and have written several plays which have been produced at La Mama, Lincoln Center, and The Drama Department in New York City. In 2001, David Sedaris became the third recipient of the Thurber Prize for American Humor. He was named by *Time* magazine as "Humorist of the Year" in 2001.

## Discussion Questions for Me Talk Pretty One Day

## Messages From My Father

Calvin Trillin, the celebrated New Yorker writer, offers a rich and engaging biography of his father, as well as a literate and entertaining fanfare for the common (and decent, and hard-working) man. Abe Trillin had the western Missouri accent of someone who had grown up in St. Joseph and the dreams of America of someone who had been born in Russia. In Kansas City, he was a grocer, at least until he swore off the grocery business. He was given to swearing off things—coffee, tobacco, alcohol, all neckties that were not yellow in color. Presumably he had also sworn off swearing, although he was a collector of curses, such as "May you have an injury that is not covered by workman's compensation." Although he had a strong vision of the sort of person he wanted his son to be, his explicit advice about how to behave didn't go beyond an almost lackadaisical "You might as well be a mensch." Somehow, though, Abe Trillin's messages got through clearly. The author's unerring sense of the American character is everywhere apparent in this quietly powerful memoir.

## About the Author

Trillin was born and raised in Kansas City, Missouri, and now lives in New York. He graduated from Yale in 1957, did a hitch in the army, and then joined Time. After a year covering the South from the Atlanta bureau, he became a writer for Time in New York. In 1963, he became a staff writer for The New Yorker. From 1967 to 1982, he produced a highly praised series of articles for The New Yorker called "U.S. Journal"—3,000-word pieces every three weeks from somewhere in the United States, on subjects that ranged from the murder of a farmer's wife in Iowa to the author's effort to write the definitive history of a Louisiana restaurant called Didee's "or to eat an awful lot of baked duck and dirty rice trying." Some of the murder stories from that series were published in 1984 as Killings, a book that was described by William Geist in the New York Times Book Review as "that rarity, reportage as art." From 1978 through 1985, Trillin was a columnist for The Nation, writing what USA Today called "simply the funniest regular column in journalism." From 1986 through 1995, the column was syndicated to newspapers. From 1996 to 2001, Trillin did a column for Time. His columns have been collected in five books.

## Discussion Questions for Messages From My Father

1. What messages does Calvin Trillin learn from his father? Which does he value most? Which does he regionalize as Midwestern or Kansas City values?
2. When is the book most humorous? Do others in your discussion group find the same passages funny? Does some of this book's humor work better for some regional, ethnic, gendered, generational, or cultural audiences than others?
3. How important is humor to Trillin's memory of his father? If you were telling the story of a parent or elder in your family, would you use humor in some of the same ways? Do you think Calvin Trillin experienced his father as funny in childhood, or is this a perspective he seems to have acquired later, as a writer?
4. In some ways this book has an entire family for its subject, not just the author's father. What messages does Trillin learn and share about extended family?
5. Do you learn anything about American immigrant experience from this book?
6. How does Trilloin address the more negative traits of his father's character?
7. What do you think of the way the author represents his mother? Does he learn any "messages" from her?
8. As a writer for *The New Yorker* and the *Nation*, Calvin Trillin has long been associated with New York. For readers who know of him as a New Yorker, what does he communicate in this book about Kansas City and the Midwest?
9. Many biographies are organized chronologically. How is this one organized? Take a minute from your discussion to thumb the chapters and review how some of them begin and end. Does the organization of the book affect in some way its "messages"?
10. Do you think Trillin wants us to understand his father and his family as exceptional or typical? Is Abe Trillin an "everyman" or someone who stands apart from the crowd? Why? If you were writing about a parent or elder in your family, would you make the same choice?

## **Pride and Prejudice**

For over 150 years, *Pride And Prejudice* has remained one of the most popular novels in the English language. Jane Austen herself called this brilliant work her "own darling child." *Pride And Prejudice*, the story of Mrs. Bennet's attempts to marry off her five daughters, is one of the best-loved and most enduring classics in English literature. Excitement fizzes through the Bennet household at Longbourn in Hertfordshire when young, eligible Mr. Charles Bingley rents the fine house nearby. He may have sisters, but he also has male friends, and one of these—the haughty, and even wealthier, Mr. Fitzwilliam Darcy—irks the vivacious Elizabeth Bennet, the second of the Bennet girls. She annoys him—which is how we know they must one day marry. The romantic clash between the opinionated Elizabeth and Darcy is a splendid rendition of civilized sparring. As the characters dance a delicate quadrille of flirtation and intrigue, Jane Austen's radiantly caustic wit and keen observation sparkle.

## **About the Author**

Jane Austen was born on December 16th, 1775. She was the seventh of eight children. Jane was mostly educated at home, where she learned how to play the piano, draw and write creatively. In March of 1817 her health began to decline and she was forced to abandon her work on "Sanditon," which she never completed. It turned out that she had Addison's disease. She died, in the arms of her sister, on Friday, 18 July 1817, at the age of only 41. Jane never married. At 14 she wrote her first novel, "Love and Friendship" and other juvenilia. Her first (unsuccessful) submission to a publisher, however, was in 1797 titled "First Impressions" (later "Pride and Prejudice"). In 1803 "Susan" (later "Northanger Abbey") was actually sold to a publisher for a mere £10 but was not published until 14 years later, posthumously. Her first accepted work was in 1811 titled "Sense and Sensibility," which was published anonymously as were all books published during her lifetime. She revised "First Impressions" and published it entitled "Pride and Prejudice" in 1813. "Mansfield Park" was published in 1814, followed by "Emma" in 1816, the same year she completed "Persuasion" and began "Sanditon," which was ultimately left unfinished. Both "Persuasion" and "Northanger Abbey" were published in 1818, after her death.

## Discussion Questions for *Pride and Prejudice*

1. If you are familiar with a film version of this story, how did the novel meet your expectations, and how did it surprise you?
2. This novel is often called “realistic” for its era. In what way does it seem to you to justify that term?
3. The original title of this novel was “First Impressions.” Does the title *Pride and Prejudice* change the meaning of the novel, or help it to transcend its era?
4. Which character is your favorite? Why?
5. As contemporary readings and films make clear, Mr. Darcy continues to appeal powerfully to readers. Explain the attraction of this character to a modern reader. Do you have any problems with him as a hero figure? Why or why not?
6. What makes this novel funny?

## **Pudd'nhead Wilson**

At the beginning of Pudd'nhead Wilson a young slave woman, fearing for her infant son's life, exchanges her light-skinned child with her master's. From this rather simple premise Mark Twain fashioned one of his most entertaining, funny, yet biting novels. On its surface, Pudd'nhead Wilson possesses all the elements of an engrossing nineteenth-century mystery: reversed identities; a horrible crime; an eccentric detective; a suspenseful courtroom drama; and a surprising, unusual solution. Yet it is not a mystery novel. Seething with the undercurrents of antebellum southern culture, the book is a savage indictment in which the real criminal is society, and racial prejudice and slavery are the crimes. Written in 1894, Pudd'nhead Wilson glistens with characteristic Twain humor, with suspense, and with pointed irony: a gem among the author's later works.

## **About the Author**

Samuel Langhorne Clemens was born November 30, 1835, the sixth child of John Marshall and Jane Lampton Clemens. Approximately four years after his birth the Clemens family moved to the town of Hannibal. As a youngster, Samuel was kept indoors because of poor health. However, by age nine, he seemed to recover from his ailments and joined the rest of the town's children outside. When Samuel was 12, his father died of pneumonia, and at 13, Samuel left school to become a printer's apprentice. After two short years, he joined his brother Orion's newspaper as a printer and editorial assistant. It was here that young Samuel found he enjoyed writing. At 17, he left Hannibal behind for a printer's job in St. Louis. While in St. Louis, Clemens became a river pilot's apprentice. He became a licensed river pilot in 1858. Clemens' pseudonym, Mark Twain, comes from his days as a river pilot. It is a river term which means two fathoms or 12-feet when the depth of water for a boat is being sounded. "Mark twain" means that is safe to navigate. Clemens began working as a newspaper reporter for several newspapers all over the United States. In 1870, Clemens married Olivia Langdon, and they had four children. Twain began to gain fame when his story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County" appeared in the New York Saturday Press on November 18, 1865. Twain's first book, "The Innocents Abroad," was published in 1869, "The Adventures of Tom Sawyer" in 1876, and "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" in 1885. Mark Twain passed away on April 21, 1910, but has a following still today. His childhood home is open to the public as a museum in Hannibal.

## Discussion Questions for Pudd'nhead Wilson

1. Twain wrote often about pairs and opposites, like Huck and Jim, the King and the Duke, the Prince and the Pauper, etc. How do we understand the characters of Tom and Chambers better for having them paired?
2. Do you sympathize with Roxy? Why or why not? Does your sympathy remain constant throughout the novel?
3. Which part of this novel is most compelling to read? Why?
4. What do you learn about Mark Twain's views of race and slavery from this novel?
5. Does nature or nurture account for the dispositions of the two boys? How sure are you? How do you know? Why is your certainty or lack of certainty on this question important to a novel that concerns itself, among other things, with the morality of race-based slavery?
6. Why is the novel named for Pudd'nhead Wilson instead of Roxy or the boys? Does the novel change meaning as we shift attention from one of these characters to another?
7. Early in his career in short fiction, Twain parodied the schoolchild's lesson that Virtue earns a reward and Vice earns punishment. Is Virtue rewarded in this story? Is Vice punished? Are you satisfied with the story's moral outcome?
8. What does this story satirize?
9. Like the better-known and earlier *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, *Pudd'nhead Wilson* is set before the Civil War but written and published a generation later. Why does Twain revisit the pre-war Mississippi River in this novel? What does the novel have to say to Americans thirty years after the war? Or today?

## The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

The novel opens with Arnold's explanation of the fact that he was born with an excess of cerebral spinal fluid in his skull (an event that he describes as being "born with water on the brain"). The brain damage that resulted from this and the surgery that he went through in order to remove some of the fluid left Arnold with many physical problems: He has forty-two teeth; is skinny; has an over-sized head, hands, and feet; has poor eyesight; and experiences frequent seizures, stutters, and lisps. Mistreated by others on the reservation because of these problems, Arnold is regularly beaten up and given such nicknames as "retard" (for the brain damage that he has sustained) and "globe" (for his large head). His family, like the majority of the other reservation families, is incredibly poor: This point is emphasized when Arnold's adopted dog Oscar begins to suffer from intense heat exhaustion and Arnold's father is forced to kill Oscar with a rifle to avoid having to pay the expensive veterinary treatment necessary to save him. Arnold's teacher, Mr. P, having seen many bright Spokane Indians (among them Arnold's sister) lose hope and a desire to succeed after experiencing life on the reservation, believes that Arnold, a relatively bright student, deserves more than what he will get from continuing to live where he is now. Arnold, prompted by Mr. P's suggestion that he leave the reservation, gets some words of advice: "You can't give up. You won't give up. You threw that book in my face because somewhere inside, you refuse to give up."

## About the Author

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He received his B.A. in American studies from Washington State University in Pullman. His books of poetry include *Face* (Hanging Loose, 2009), *One Stick Song* (2000), *The Man Who Loves Salmon* (1998), *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), *Water Flowing Home* (1995), *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *I Would Steal Horses* (1992), and *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992). He is also the author of several novels and collections of short fiction including *Flight* (Grove Press, 2007); *Ten Little Indians* (2003); *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000); *Indian Killer* (1996); *Reservation Blues* (1994), which won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award; and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which received a Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Alexie and Chris Eyre wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals*, which was based on Alexie's short story "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." The movie won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998.

## Discussion Questions for *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

1. Several important characters or experiences are paired in this novel: Junior and Rowdy, Reardan and Wellpinit, the Arnold Jr & Sr, etc. How do these pairs contribute to the novel? How do we understand one item in a pair better for the presence of its partner or opposite?
2. Is this a novel more for youth or adults? Why? Does it have different messages for readers of different ages? Do readers of different ages find it funny for the same reasons? Does the book's humor help readers of different ages understand each other?
3. Mr. P is not an entirely attractive character, but he does something important for Junior. How do you think Alexie expects us to take this character? Do we like Mr. P? Identify with him? Admire him? Recognize other people like him? Does Mr. P cause us to think differently about anyone in our world?
4. Some schools have banned this book from required reading lists or libraries or both. Do you understand why school boards have made this decision? How would you vote if asked to decide whether students should (a) be required to read this book in 8th or 9th grade or (b) have access to it in the school library? Why?
5. Of his collaboration with illustrator Ellen Forney, Alexie has written on his website, "I love that she saw Junior in ways that I did not." What do the illustrations add to Junior's character?
6. How does Alexie turn tragedy (violent death, betrayal of a friend, alcoholism, etc) into humor?
7. Does Alexie cross a line for you between humor and something else -- offense, or bad taste? If so, where is this line? Why might readers disagree over the humor of this book? Is there cultural value in a work like this one whose humor borders on something unpleasant?
8. A humorist can teach us to see the world differently, perhaps more humanely. Does Alexie cause you to think differently about Native Americans and reservations? About alcoholism? About friendship and family? Do you feel more humane after reading this book? Why (not)?

## The Importance of Being Earnest

The Importance of Being Earnest is one of Wilde's most famous plays and still commands the affection of the public through its cinematic adaptations; most recently with Reese Witherspoon and Colin Firth. In *Earnest*, Wilde uses a mixture of social drama, popular at the time, and other popular but less politically engaged forms such as melodrama and farce. Within the drama Wilde manages to satirize the values that many still believed were the very reason for the great triumphs of Victorian Britain on the world stage. These were the ideas of respectability, self sacrifice, moral rectitude and high mindedness that were closely associated with the Victorian aristocracy. Little by little, however, Wilde reveals all these to be simply elements of an elaborate mask worn by the ruling elites, behind which each is engaged in precisely the opposite modes of behavior. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is about an English gentleman who pretends to be his own brother, named Ernest, so he can enjoy himself in the city without besmirching his reputation at his country estate. Unfortunately, he's just fallen in love with a young woman who insists that she can only marry a man named Ernest--and when his best friend goes to his country estate pretending to be this same brother Ernest, he falls in love with the protagonist's ward, who similarly feels that Ernest is the perfect name for a husband... The absurdity of the plot is matched by the exquisite cleverness of the dialogue.

## About the Author

Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde (16 October 1854 – 30 November 1900) was an Irish writer and poet. He became one of London's most popular playwrights in the early 1890s, known for his biting wit, flamboyant dress, and glittering conversation. At the turn of the 1890s, he refined his ideas about the supremacy of art in a series of dialogues and essays, and incorporated themes of decadence, duplicity, and beauty into his only novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). He wrote *Salome* (1891) in French in Paris but it was refused a license. Unperturbed, Wilde produced four society comedies in the early 1890s, which made him one of the most successful playwrights of late Victorian London. In prison he wrote *De Profundis* (written in 1897 & published in 1905), a long letter which discusses his spiritual journey through his trials, forming a dark counterpoint to his earlier philosophy of pleasure. Upon his release he left immediately for France, never to return to Ireland or Britain. There he wrote his last work, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* (1898), a long poem commemorating the harsh rhythms of prison life. He died destitute in Paris at the age of forty-six.

## Discussion Questions for The Importance of Being Earnest

1. Lady Bracknell seems a perfect representation of a class and a time. How can we account for the fact that audiences continue to remember and delight in her character? Is there something timeless about her?
2. Oscar Wilde is a keen observer of courtship and marriage. What insights about romantic love and marriage linger with you from this play?
3. Wilde is famous for his witticisms and clever turns of phrase. Which ones did you find most delightful and most apt? Is there value in this kind of humor?
4. We might find in this play both a celebration and a critique of the decadent life of the late nineteenth century British upper class. The play indulges in language for its own sake, among other evidently useless delights. To what degree are idleness, decadence, and literary indulgence celebrated by the play? To what degree criticized or satirized?
5. Find a recipe for cucumber sandwiches. When your discussion group meets to discuss this play, bring cucumber sandwiches to share with the group. Pass them around. Give time for this. Are these something you eat regularly? How does it feel to read, hear, and discuss the play while eating cucumber sandwiches?
6. Watch a film version of this play (as a group or individually). What do you notice about the choices of the performers and director? As you think about the written play again, where does Wilde seem most precise about conveying the story and characters in a particular way, and where does he leave room for others' interpretation?

## The Skyscraper That Flew and Other Stories

Arroyo Grande is an ordinary town where unusual things sometimes happen," Choo Choo Torres tells his friends. Indeed, this little West Texas town proves to be a place where unusual things often happen. From an enormous crystal skyscraper that mysteriously appears in the middle of the Arroyo Grande Sluggers' baseball field...a midnight media shower that inspires a pachanga, complete with music and concessions in an abandoned parking lot...a sudden shift in the whole town's circadian rhythms, keeping everyone up at night and asleep during the day...a repair shop in town that boasts "We Fix Anything" in the window and even extends the offer to broken hearts...this collection of short stories brims with offbeat events. In this, the sequel to *The Fabulous Sinkhole and Other Stories*, Jesús Salvador Treviño once again populates his hamlet with a lively community. There's Chicas Patas, a zoot-suited newcomer who speaks a 1940's-era slang; Yoli Mendez, a spunky teen who steals the show by performing quadratic equations in her head; Ed Carillo and Mayor Al Snyder, local politicians who seize every opportunity to campaign; and, a bevy of other interesting and unique citizens of Arroyo Grande.

## About the Author

Jesús Salvador Treviño began his career in film and television as a student activist documenting the 1960s Chicano civil rights struggle with a super-8 camera. Throughout the late sixties and early nineteen seventies, he was both a participant and a chronicler of the events and issues of the day. Mr. Treviño has won dozens of national and international awards and recognitions including (twice) the prestigious Directors Guild of America award and an Alma award for Outstanding Director of a Television drama and an Alma award as Co-Executive Producer of *Resurrection Boulevard*, Best Prime-time drama series. Mr. Treviño is also a writer. His collection of short stories, *The Fabulous Sinkhole And Other Stories* was published in 1995. His memoir, *Eyewitness - A Filmmaker's Memoir Of The Chicano Movement* was published in 2001. His latest collection of short stories, *The Skyscraper That Flew*, was published in November of 2005.

## Discussion Questions for The Skyscraper That Flew

1. This collection of stories is a sequel to an earlier book, *The Fabulous Sinkhole and Other Stories*, and the title story of this collection, “The Skyscraper That Flew” promises more “fabulous” action in Arroyo Grande. In what sense is this book “fabulous”? The dictionary offers the following definitions: 1. Almost impossible to believe; incredible; 2. Told about in fables; purely imaginary. Is there value in fables and fabulous storytelling today?
2. Do you have a favorite character in these stories? Who, and why?
3. How would you describe the humor of this book? How important is it to the storytelling? To the lives of these characters? To what degree does humor help to solve real problems in Arroyo Grande?
4. In what way are the people of Arroyo Grande like people in your community? How are they different?
5. Many Let’s Talk About It books have something to say about the way people relate to neighbors and communities. Compare the community of Arroyo Grande with other communities or neighbors that you have encountered in your book discussions. What makes Arroyo Grande a successful community?
6. In “Miracle on Calle Nueve,” a priest complains to God, “you gave signs to all these old-timers. Noah got an ark, Joseph got a coat of many colors, Joshua got to tumble down walls, for Moses you parted the Red Sea, and what do I get? All I get is a crummy little light bulb in Mrs. Ybarra’s bathroom? Don’t I deserve more?” Does this book encourage belief in miracles? How does the “Miracle on Calle Nueve” relate to the other fabulous events of this book? What do you make of the reasonable explanation for the “Miracle”?
7. Treviño must be aware that a book written in English will have some readers who do not also speak Spanish. In two stories, one character even speaks such a dated Spanish slang that even the other *characters* don’t understand him! How did you feel about the parts of the book you did not understand? Why do you think the author wrote this way?
8. Treviño is careful to represent characters of all ages with dignity. Discuss the various ways that characters in this story interact with each other across generations.
9. Would you want to live in Arroyo Grande? Why or why not?

## Where'd You Go, Bernadette?

Bernadette Fox is notorious. To her Microsoft-guru husband, she's a fearlessly opinionated partner; to fellow private-school mothers in Seattle, she's a disgrace; to design mavens, she's a revolutionary architect, and to 15-year-old Bee, she is a best friend and, simply, Mom.

Then Bernadette disappears. It began when Bee aced her report card and claimed her promised reward: a family trip to Antarctica. But Bernadette's intensifying allergy to Seattle--and people in general--has made her so agoraphobic that a virtual assistant in India now runs her most basic errands. A trip to the end of the earth is problematic.

To find her mother, Bee compiles email messages, official documents, secret correspondence--creating a compulsively readable and touching novel about misplaced genius and a mother and daughter's role in an absurd world.

## About the Author

Maria Semple spent her first few years traveling around Europe with her parents. While living in Spain, her father Lorenzo wrote the pilot for the TV series *Batman*. The family packed up and moved to Los Angeles. After Lorenzo became established as a screenwriter, the family moved to Aspen, Colorado. For high school, Maria was sent away to Choate Rosemary Hall and College at Barnard, where Maria had big plans of becoming a novelist or a teacher. Those dreams got derailed when she sold a movie script to Twentieth Century Fox just after graduation. The movie didn't get made, but she moved to LA and made a living writing more screenplays that didn't get made. Maria got into TV when her friend Darren Star - whom she'd met on the ski slopes in Aspen years earlier - gave her a job on Beverly Hills, 90210. Thus began a fifteen-year career in television, writing for shows like *Ellen*, *Mad About You* and *Arrested Development*. Maria had a baby, quit television and finally gave novel writing a try. *This One Is Mine* was published by Little, Brown in December 2008. Maria, her boyfriend and daughter moved to Seattle where her new novel, *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*, begins. Maria teaches writing, studies poetry and admittedly tries, with mixed results, to stay off the internet.

## Discussion Questions for *Where'd You Go, Bernadette*?

1. Why does Bernadette keep having trouble with her neighbors? What's funny about her problems with neighbors? What's not so funny?
2. Do you consider any of the Branch-Fox family problems normal? If so, which ones, and how does this family deal with those problems?
3. Do you find yourself taking sides between Elgin and Bernadette? Do you think the novelist wants you to take sides? Does it help Bee to take sides? Do you change your thinking about these two?
4. Does anybody in your discussion group think it's a good idea for Bernadette to hire a "virtual assistant"? What does your group think of Samantha 2? What is the relationship between these two innovations? By the end of the novel, what has happened to both? What do you think of these outcomes?
5. How many different ways do people express themselves creatively in this novel? What makes creative expression so important?
6. Which physical spaces are described in most detail in this novel, and what do the physical spaces tell us about the characters?
7. You might say this is Bee's story, or you might say it's a story told by many people. What's important to Bee in telling this story? What's the impact of having the story told by many?
8. What made you laugh in this book? How did laughter affect your response to the characters? If you are reading this book as part of a Humor/Satire discussion, did you worry at some point that this was not going to be a funny book after all? If so, when did that happen? Did you like this book better when it was funny, or better when it was not? Why?
9. One function of humor is to break down conventions and boundaries and cause us to see important issues freshly. Does this book cause you to see differently anything that you are accustomed to taking for granted? What aspects of contemporary or American or Seattle or family life does it satirize?