

FUN CAMP: College Discussion Questions/Potential Activities/Summary

Gabe Durham/Publishing Genius Press/2013

Summary:

FUN CAMP is an unconventional novel featuring a series of vignettes about a week at a fictional summer camp. These vignettes come in a variety of forms—soliloquies, questions, letters, lists, monologues, cards and conversations—and each works to provide a different perspective of what camp “life” is all about. They depict moments and feelings associated with the highs and lows of life at camp; some are humorous, others are tragic, yet all are honest and unique insights into the psychology of camp.

The novel is structured along the lines of a full week at camp, a section for every day from arrival on Monday to departure on Sunday. The reader derives broader themes and meaning given how they interpret these individual moments over the course of this fictional week. The moments come from the perspective of the different campers, counselors and “perma-staff” that make up the many faces of the FUN CAMP experience. The reoccurring characters are archetypal in what their perspectives add to the overarching narrative and multifaceted tone of the novel. From Tad Gunnick, a veteran camper/heart throb, to Grogg, the eccentric yet painfully blunt camp cook, to Billy, a first time camper writing home as he’s increasingly enlightened during his time away from it.

While the vignettes convey timeless truths, both the characters and the reader are increasingly aware of camp’s fleeting nature as the days wear on. The book describes what it is like to experience a distinct moment in time, meaningful while it lasts but over all too soon, a metaphor for growing up and becoming a person. The campers, counselors and staff try their hardest to find personal meaning and worth out of this impermanence, learning and teaching each other lessons to hold onto once camp shuts down for the summer. A sense of universality and relatability stems from the variety of learning and teaching moments that the characters provide. The lessons the reader takes away are similar in nature, trying to find a broader way of contextualizing the significance of FUN CAMP during and after the read.

The loosened structure allows elbow-room in which readers can construct their own meaning, free from the limitations of a linear narrative plot. While the lessons are universal, they’ll affect each reader differently, as the lessons of camp work the same way on the characters trying to define a sense of individualism out of a collective experience. Durham’s novel is an exemplum of experimental and creative writing, useful in teaching students alternative ways of considering narration, humor, character and setting. He constructs a believable and heartfelt story out of snippets of language, creating a world out of glimpses that are sturdy enough to depict a full picture. Novice writers would benefit from the lessons this book teaches in both story development and understanding the subjectivity of a reader’s perspective.

Discussable Themes: identity, socialization, nostalgia, religion, authority, gender, sexuality, coming of age, the subjectivity of the narrative—question what students derived from the book and why each responds differently.

FUN CAMP Discussion/Test Questions:

What about the individual vignettes aids in the construction of a broader narrative?

How is the broader narrative constructed, despite the fact that it doesn't follow a typical linear plot?

- Discussion of the benefits of a linear plot that might be passed over within FUN CAMP?
The benefits of not having a linear plot?

What kinds of lessons are those at FUN CAMP learning?

- What do campers/staff teach themselves/others?

What lessons do these vignettes present to the reader? Is there actually a concrete lesson?

What do the individual headings reveal about the stories that accompany them? How do they construct a particular reading of the text?

Is this a book about growing up? If so, how so? In what specific ways?

If not, what is this book about below the surface of being about a camp? Or is it just about camp and the reader supplements it with their own significance?

How do metaphors function in the story? How do they construct a particular reading of the text? How does metaphor contribute to tone and differentiate between characters?

Describe the interplay between what is real vs. what is hyperbolic within the story—how moments of hard-hitting reality pair with those of exaggeration. A fine line, indeed.

Consider different levels of authority presented at camp—Who's in control and how is authority layered? Are there overlapping authorities?

- See “The Creative Use of Meal Time,” pg. 50, “Not Here to Fake Friends,” pg. 79

What moral teachings does the camp try to instill in campers? Is this a secular camp?

Discuss Durham's use of camp language. What camp colloquialisms does he create and how does the reader know how to interpret them? Ex. “Fun vs. Unfun,” “perma-staff,” Grogg's language.

In what ways does the concept of Fun vs. Unfun campers iterate the meaning of being “on message”? How do those concepts compete with yet rely upon each other?

- See, “Dangerous Approximations of Hilarity,” pg. 61.

Discussion of social/group mentality in the story. How are people supposed to relate to one another in this setting?

Does the story bring about a conflict between isolation and individualism? Is it possible to achieve individualism in a group without isolation?

Why does the camp work so hard to force “fun” on those that aren’t interested (the unfun)?

- “Flight of the Boring,” pg. 119

Do camp activities make room for individualism? How is camp a form of socialization?

- “Two Days, Fourteen Hours,” pg. 93

What forms of writing does Durham utilize in the story? Why do you think he chose such a variety of voices and writing styles?

In what ways is humor derived from Durham’s nonconventional use of language? In what ways are darker emotions evoked through the same language?

What characters are given names vs. what characters remain more as vague generalizations?

What kinds of characters are given names?

- Consider: Tad, Billy, Grogg, Puddy, Tom/Janna, Dave and Holly.

What are the racial and economic demographics of the camp?

- “Every Evening Skits,” pg. 22, “Laura Winslow and the Baffling Sincerity,” pg. 65

How do campers relate to the outside world, notably their absent parents?

- “Perk,” pg. 11, “Dead-beat Dads,” pg. 29, Billy’s letters

Is camp a pastoral place? It tries to be timeless; does it succeed or just seem outdated? Describe the role of nature and nostalgia, in terms of how camp rejects modern technologies to create organic memories.

- “Withdrawal,” pg. 36, “Armistice,” pg. 62

FUN CAMP Writing Activities~~~

The following activities would be useful following an in-class discussion of FUN CAMP, specifically an introductory level creative writing class—perhaps novel-writing or humor-writing.

- Work-shop humor writing in class—have students practice different styles of writing—in letters, lists, dialogues related to something they recently find funny. Constrict each piece to about the length of a FUN CAMP vignette.

- Have students read one another's vignette and compare their reactions to the original intent of the author. Ask if this was a "you had to be there" scenario or if it was generally funny. Did the author's telling succeed in making it funny?
- Have students compile their own novellas (or short story) in an extensive project, in which each student picks an overarching theme and create vignettes that aid in a cohesive narration of that theme. If limited on time, give a theme to the class and have each student supply a vignette, creating a class version of the same thing.

Links:

Publisher's website description: <http://publishinggenius.com/?p=2033>

FUN CAMP reviewed by Joe Sacksteder: <http://www.tarpaulinsky.com/2013/05/gabe-durham-fun-camp/>

FUN CAMP reviewed by Heavy Feather: <http://heavyfeatherreview.com/2013/05/30/gabe-durhams-fun-camp/>