

Loomis Chaffee

Conversation-starting Questions for the Summer Reading Novels

FRESHMEN REQUIRED NOVELS

Snow Falling on Cedars

1. Consider the various literary genres that converge in *Snow Falling On Cedars*: love story, detective novel, social satire/polemic against prejudice, historical fiction, coming-of-age journey. Which of these, or any other you might imagine, best describes the entire novel? Explain your answer.
2. Compare and contrast how, over the course of the novel, the outlooks of Ishmael Chambers and Hatsue Miyamoto are influenced by their families, by their ethnic backgrounds, by historical events, and by their own personal experiences?
3. What, according to the novel, is the duty of a responsible newspaper publisher? Does Ishmael Chambers come to understand his responsibility? How?
4. Do Hatsue and Ishmael ever really love one another? At the novel's conclusion, how would you describe their relationship?
5. Considering the context of the entire novel, explain what Hatsue means when she says, "People don't have to be unfair, do they? That isn't just *part of things*, when people are unfair to somebody."
6. Consider the role of nature, particularly the blizzard, in the novel. Discuss the symbolic significance of the storm on at least two levels.

Warriors Don't Cry

1. Melba's grandmother likens Melba to a "warrior on the battlefield for you Lord." What qualities do warriors have? In what sense are Melba and the eight students "warriors"?
2. Why do you think Beals comes to see her Central High experience as something positive? How has it shaped her identity? How has it shaped the rest of her life?
3. Do you believe that Link was heroic for helping Beals or do you think he was cowardly for not being more open in his support for the Little Rock Nine? Why?
4. What can we do to confront racism? How can we as individuals and as a community make positive differences in our world?

My Name Is Asher Lev (coming soon . . .)

SOPHOMORE REQUIRED NOVELS

Bel Canto

1. In the opening pages the narrator reveals that Roxane Coss, a revered soprano, is the real (and only) reason Mr. Hosokawa, the chairman of the largest electronics corporation in Japan, comes to this poor, unnamed country in South America. In turn, Mr. Hosokawa is the reason everyone else had come to his birthday party. Is either one to blame for this hostage crisis? Why? Why not? If not, who do you think is to blame?
2. Inspired by a real incident—the 1996 takeover of the Japanese embassy in Lima, Peru—the novel combines romance, politics and fantasy. How is it all at once a love story, a political thriller and a tale of improbable utopia?
3. In this group of multinational characters, the language of music breaks through not only the barriers of language but also the barriers between the band of guerilla revolutionaries and their hostages. Describe Roxane Coss. Why does she make such an impression on the other captives and their captors? Is it merely that she is famous? How does her singing and the music relate to the story?
4. Think about Father Argueda's choice to stay with the hostages. How does religion play a role in the novel?
5. Richard Gere's character in the film *Pretty Woman* declares: "People either love opera or they hate it, and if they hate it, they can never learn to love it." Ann Patchett disagrees, arguing that "opera is like baseball. If you don't know what's going on, it is not interesting. You can watch opera all day long and not be moved by it, and in fact be tortured by it, if you don't know how to keep score, so to speak."

Whose side are you on? Have you ever seen, heard or experienced opera? Are you familiar with the art form? What's your opinion?

1984

1. Do you think that individuality is important when dealing with society's values? Is it better to be a "team player" or to go your own way?
2. Do you think that Newspeak is as farfetched as it first appears? Are there circumstances today in which language is limited?
3. What role does fear play in Winston's life? What is he so afraid of?

4. Do you see evidence of "Big Brother" in your life today?

Buffalo Soldier

1. Note the brief passages about buffalo soldier George Rowe that begin each chapter. How does his story relate to the characters and conflicts in the novel?
2. Do Terry and Laura respond differently to the death of their daughters? You might enjoy reading Robert Frost's poem "Home Burial," which deals with a comparable situation.
3. Is the Sheldon home really a good placement for Alfred? What do Terry and Laura expect of him?
4. What role does Professor Hebert play in the novel? Why does he want a horse?
5. How does Alfred feel about Hillary and Megan Sheldon, the two girls who drowned?

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JUNIOR REQUIRED NOVELS

The Bean Trees

1. How are Taylor and Lou Ann alike and not? How does Kingsolver emphasize their similarities and differences?
2. Notice all the connections between Turtle and birds. Pay particular attention to the X-ray at the doctor's office.
3. Mattie sees a desert flower come to life in a rain storm, and comments: "things that look dead are just dormant." What other things in the novel look dead but are just sleeping?
4. When Estevan says that Taylor's language is poetic, she responds by calling his compliment "hogwash." His rejoinder: " 'Washing hogs' is poetic." Think about different kinds of poetry in the novel: the poetry of everyday speech, the poetry of erudite speech, the poetry of combinations.
5. Barbara Kingsolver says that her motto as a writer is: "Don't Preach!" What's the sermon that she's not preaching here? In other words, what's the unspoken idea, or the unargued argument, that holds the novel together?
6. Explain the title of the novel. (One of the final chapters will be especially helpful.)

A Prayer for Owen Meany

1. By beginning his story saying he is "doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice," and concluding his narrative saying, "I am always saying prayers for Owen Meany," Johnny Wheelwright implies his relationship with the "boy with a wrecked voice," has changed as Johnny himself has grown older. What statement does this change make about gratitude, humility or faith?
2. John Irving's novel illuminates the subtle differences between fate and destiny. Look up each word in an unabridged dictionary and think about how each force plays a role in the lives of Johnny and Owen and several other characters central to the novel.
3. Owen makes a promise which involves dedication and self-sacrifice. Should he have given his word? Is keeping his promise worthwhile?
4. Are secrets a positive or negative force in the lives of the central characters?
5. Review the techniques Owen uses and the advice he offers as he tutors Johnny. How would you rate him as a teacher?
6. Reverend Merrill contends that faith and doubt go hand-in-hand. Does his idea seem at odds with Owen Meany's advice and behavior?

SENIOR REQUIRED NOVELS

Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close

1. Why does Foer use a child as his narrator? What can Oskar show the reader that an adult could not?
2. What do you think of the unconventional printing techniques used in this book? What about the photographs? Do these details help or hinder your enjoyment of the book? Your understanding?
3. How do you react to a character who says, "I'm sorry, I don't speak," yet tells us so much anyway?
4. Do you think that emotional impact of the 9/11 attacks has the same force with teenagers (many of whom were very young in 2001) as it does with adults?

Life of Pi

1. How does growing up with a zoo influence the way Pi sees life, or sees people?
2. Pi tells the Japanese investigators that they want from him a story “that will confirm what you already know” (302). Do you think most people want stories that they “already know”? Or do some want to hear of unimaginable events? Why do people favor one type or the other? (Think back to your freshman year reading of *Snow in August* to reference a story that is unimaginable.)
3. Why does Pi love Richard Parker? If Richard Parker represents something else (mentioned in the ending), why would Pi love that thing, and why would he not? Would you love your Richard Parker?
4. In the end, which story about what happened on the lifeboat would you rather believe?
5. Why do you favor that story?
6. Why is Pi the most free when he’s lost all hope of survival? Do you think you would react the same way? Do you think you would reach a point when you’d lost all hope? How do you think you would react at that point?
7. At the start of the novel, one of the characters describes the events as “a story that will make you believe in God.” What does this mean? How does this story relate to believing in God?

Purple Hibiscus (coming soon . . .)