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Reader's Guide

from John McManus
 author of *Fox Tooth Heart*

Author Asks:

1. I wanted to give a sense, however abstractly, of the belief systems of most characters in *Fox Tooth Heart*. Sometimes I refer to a specific church, like the Church of Christ, Scientist in "Cult Heroes." At other times objective facts about characters' beliefs are harder to find. Do you come away with a sense of these protagonists as struggling to understand their worlds and the meaning of life?
2. What do you think Caidin in "The Ninety-Fifth Percentile" will be like when he grows up?
3. What do you make of Carl's thoughts and plans in the final paragraph of "Gateway to the Ozarks"? How could his dread "change the past"?
4. Is Stephen in "The Gnat Line" a sympathetic character? Is Jeremy? Is Patrick? How would you arrange the camps' residents on a spectrum from least to most sympathetic?
5. A related question: I'll often hear people complain that a book's characters aren't "likable." I must admit that such assessments baffle me (and put me in mind of people who vote for president based on which candidate they'd prefer to sit down and have a beer with), but does the so-called likability of any character influence your enjoyment of the story he or she appears in?
6. In "Blood Brothers" the narrator may be high at the time of narration. How do his warped ideas about the world (e.g. his sense that the Pale Blue Dot photo of earth that's the default screensaver on his iPhone is actually a real-time video) affect your ability to trust his reportage on emotions and relationships?
7. How do you feel about Ike's notion in "Elephant Sanctuary" that future computers' translation of elephant communication would reveal a complex history of a tragedy of incalculable proportion?
8. What's going to happen to Max in the months or years after the present action of "Bugaboo" ends?
9. Why does Betsy in "Betsy from Pike" study religion after she goes to prison?
10. Over the years critics have kept calling my stories "dark" and "depressing." Are these stories actually any more dark and depressing than real life?

Writing Exercises:

The Ugly Exercise

One writing prompt I give out often is some version of “When you were in the seventh grade, what did you think was ugly?” I’m not trying to claim credit for this exercise; I probably read it in some craft book. Since I teach creative writing, publishers are always sending me sample copies in the hope that I’ll assign them a class of students. This one helps get at characters’ aesthetic sensibilities, which I think is essential to full realization.

Counterparts

An exercise I did design involves the creation of various counterparts of oneself, to help writers avoid the pitfall that Frederick Reiken calls the “author-narrator-character merge” (which involves writing characters so similar to ourselves that we forget to describe the characters’ unique qualities). In one counterpart prompt I tell students, “This version of yourself is a decade older than you, and has met with at least one huge failure during that decade, and inexplicably can’t remember anything that happened for a whole calendar year during that decade, but otherwise is just like you.” They create several other counterparts too, and then part B involves putting the counterparts into situations that can serve as the beginnings of stories.

Further Reading:

I can’t narrow it down . . . , so here are thirty-three:

1. *Absalom, Absalom!*—William Faulkner
2. *Our Lady of the Flowers*—Jean Genet
3. *This Book Will Save Your Life*—A. M. Homes
4. *Housekeeping*—Marilynne Robinson
5. *Taking Care*—Joy Williams
6. *Open City*—Teju Cole
7. *Blood Meridian*—Cormac McCarthy
8. *On Moral Fiction*—John Gardner
9. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*—Flannery O’Connor
10. *Selected Stories*—Alice Munro
11. *The Known World*—Edward P Jones
12. *Collected Stories*—Jorge Luis Borges
13. *The Diaries of Vaslav Nijinsky*
14. *Under the Volcano*—Malcolm Lowry
15. *Elizabeth Costello*—J.M. Coetzee
16. *Invisible Man*—Ralph Ellison
17. *Cities of the Red Night*—William S Burroughs
18. *The Elementary Particles*—Michel Houellebecq



19. *2666*—Roberto Bolaño
20. *The Savage Detectives*—Roberto Bolaño
21. *The Easter Parade*—Richard Yates
22. *The Waterfront Journals*—David Wojnarowicz
23. *Angels*—Denis Johnson
24. *The Rings of Saturn*—W.G. Sebald
25. *The Poor Mouth*—Flann O'Brien
26. *The Dog of the South*—Charles Portis
27. *Episode in the Life of a Landscape Painter*—Cesar Aira
28. *Concrete*—Thomas Bernhard
29. *Controlled Burn*—Scott Wolven
30. *Kindred*—Octavia Butler
31. *Shadow Country*—Peter Matthiessen
32. *Song of Solomon*—Toni Morrison
33. *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness*—Richard Yates

