

A Reading Group Toolkit for William Henry Lewis' *I Got Somebody in Staunton*

The GO READ books have been chosen because they raise questions about various aspects of the character of a community. In this collection of stories, Lewis addresses questions of race, family, connection, and memory. Take notice of the rich variation of voices; what do the voices have in common, and how are they different?

"Sometimes you get to feeling things for other people, like their problems could be yours. If you love your children, you could feel for anybody's children, even if they ain't yours." (page 79)

In past GO READ books, the characters have struggled with the truth. In fiction we are able to explore the fact that truth is multi-faceted. Much depends on where we're standing and what we're looking at; these stories allow us to stand in places that are not ordinarily our own.

How does the first person narrative involve you in the story? How does this compare with your involvement in third person narratives?

"When the drinks came she said, *well, sometimes you never know just who is gonna get you to the place you need to be.* (page 55)

Lewis' characters are often traveling. What are they moving from or toward? Do you see that they will be better off when they reach their destinations? Why? Why not? In the title story we follow the characters in a trip across Virginia. On another level, the journey is much more involved. Give examples of all the destinations in Lewis' stories.

Lewis has been described as a quiet writer, a writer who uses minimal language to convey a thought, a writer who chronicles the odd minutes in life, a writer who uses deceptively simple plots. Give some examples of Lewis' style from his stories.

How does dislike for a character influence your reaction to a story?

If you read these stories more than once, try to read them as you would listen to a classic jazz recording. The first time through you may hear the main melody; upon rereading, listen to the subtleties and interaction of the different elements, much as hearing the saxophone, clarinet, and drums.

"I Got Somebody in Staunton"

James Farmer, a principal founder of the Congress of Racial Equality, played a towering role in the civil rights movement. Why is this story dedicated to him? Who are some of the unsung heroes of any movement?

We hear Clive's internal monologue as he replays his uncle's warnings. Is Clive's truth challenged as the story unfolds? Does truth change? Think of examples in your own life when an accepted truth was challenged.

How does our knowledge of the past affect our perceptions of the present?

What is real and what is perceived in the race relations depicted in this story?

Why do we feel tension as we read this story?

What do we know about Keri?

"For the Brothers Who Ain't Here"

How does this story define friendship?

The story ends with the questions, "Who are you? Where you going? Where you coming from?"

Why are you here? Why don't you move along?" (page 103)

How would you answer these questions? What other questions are posed?

"Shades," "Kudzu," "In the Swamp"

Discuss the multiple meanings found in the titles of these three stories dealing with Watertown.

“Potcake”

Has Carlos completed his journey?

How much of Carlos' consciousness do we enter hear, and how uncomfortable are we with that prospect?

“Why We Jump”

What was the connection between Lynette Simmons and Samuel Cates?

What do you think caused her to be so disconnected from life?

What other characters are disconnected in this collection of stories?

Are there times in your life that being disconnected helps you cope?

How would you carry this story to a resolution?

“Rossonian Days”

Read this story aloud. What music plays in your mind as you read?

“Urban Renewal,” “Crusade”

In what ways did these stories remind you of Richmond?

What are the pros and cons of urban renewal?

What do these stories say about the people who make these decisions?

What does “Crusade” point out about post civil rights movement history?

“In the Swamp”

Why is the main character mad at Cal after their night in the swamp?

“No one wanted to tell a story about her just up and gone, no goodbye, no reason. People wanted to figure out why, like something in them wouldn't be settled if they didn't get it right.”

(page 33)

How is this quotation a window into the story?

All GO READ books give us the point of view of first person narrators. What is the narrator's agenda? Do you trust who is telling you these stories? How emotionally vested are you in their stories? Does the narrator change how we become involved?

The Irish left their country to build a better life in *Charming Billy* (GO READ 2005). In *A Lesson Before Dying* (GO READ 2002) by Ernest Gaines, Grant feels he has no option of leaving; indeed, he is asked to stay in his community to help tell their stories. “I came back, which pleased my aunt. But I had been running in place ever since, unable to accept what used to be my life, unable to leave it.”

“How did it work that people could let go of their pasts? Just burn away the parts they didn't want, open their arms to the life they wanted? I wondered what story Momma had made of Glenda and Cal, and what Cal thought of Momma. Burn or bury, forget or not remember. It felt the same. That's when I felt like not remembering would be a good thing for me.” (pages 42-43)

Does anyone really leave his or her past behind? How does reading and writing offer a better way to deal with situations and bring about change? According to Lewis, why are stories important? In your opinion, what do we, as people, need from stories – both from reading them and telling them?

Communal story telling gives us strength and can also defend weakness. What links do you see between Lewis' stories and the stories of the south?