

**A Reading Group Toolkit
for
White People
by Allan Gurganus**

There are as many kinds of pain as fiction, and because I find being in trouble comic, my ambition has been to write the funniest things possible about the worst things that can happen to you as a human being. A sense of music, a sense of history, and a sense of justice are all necessary for the fiction writer. (Allan Gurganus in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, 1991)

Fiction can create a portrait of where we have been, historically and personally, and at the same time illuminate where we are now. The stories of *White People*, set in the author's youth and our recent past, give us a picture of the South in the late 1950's and early 1960's, a picture that also acts as a reflecting surface for Richmond in 2004. The novella "Blessed Assurance" particularly emphasizes these themes of place and time and does so in part because the author sets the story slightly outside the actual years of his own conscious knowledge of the racially charged world around him. Allan Gurganus invites us all to examine the selves we have formed since then in the mirror provided by our collective recent history. Students will find a representation of their parents' experience, and adults will recognize the time through which they have lived.

"The White People [in Allan Gurganus's book] lead lives that are hopeful, sketchy, waiting to be colored in, like a child's crayon drawings." (Rhoda Koenig, *New York Magazine*, 1991)

In this collection of stories Allan Gurganus addresses questions of race, gender, sexual orientation, and morality. How does the author approach these issues in the different story settings? As you read, pay close attention to the significance of story titles and the last line of each story. Take notice of the rich variation of voices; what do the voices have in common, and how are they different?

We recommend that you consider these stories in three groups. The first introduces certain themes; the second group expands them as they relate to one family; and the final "group" is the novella "Blessed Assurance," which brings a more sustained narrative to bear on the book's intentions and ideas.

This first group of stories introduces and deals with common themes throughout the collection:

“Reassurance”

1. “It seems to me from here that your Frank has cared way too much for how others saw him.” (p. 188) As you read these stories, what other characters share this belief?
2. If you had the opportunity to leave one last message, to whom would it be addressed, and what would it say?

“Nativity, Caucasian”

1. “Really ruined your party. If I’d only guessed....Richard will be absolutely livid. Oh, this so *unlike* me.” (p. 51) What purpose does humor serve to help us deal with more serious occasions?
2. Do you think your birth explains who you are? How do the circumstances of their birth affect other characters in other stories?
3. What other characters behave in ways so unlike themselves? When do we defy our own expectations of who we are?

“It Had Wings,” “Condolences to Everyone of Us”

1. “Notice things here.” (p. 136) Both these stories deal with a kind of awareness or lack of awareness. What is that awareness, and how is it different in the two stories?
2. What makes a lucky person?

The following three stories connect the same characters at different times in their lives:

“Minor Heroism”

1. What is minor heroism? How does this set the tone for the entire book?
2. “You might say Bryan and I have never really seen eye to eye.” (p. 14) Why does the author change the point of view from son to father and back to son? What does it tell us about what they know and do not know about each other?
3. This story introduces us to Bryan. What are we beginning to learn about him? What secrets does he keep?

“Breathing Room”

1. “Without much accuracy, with strangely little love at all, your family will decide for you exactly who you are, and they’ll keep nudging, coaxing,

poking you until you've changed into that very simple shape." (p. 65)
How is this statement true for the characters in the three related stories?
How is this true for you?

2. Is Bryan his brother's keeper?
3. How does the balance change between Bryan and Bradley?
4. Bryan deliberately commits an act of mean spirited cruelty toward his brother. How does this reflect what Allan Gurganus says about our basic nature? What does it mean when Bryan tells Bradley and how Bradley responds?
5. Have we forgiven ourselves for our deliberate cruelties?

"A Hog Loves Its Life"

1. "The old man told and told – unaware of giving me a future, not a past." (p. 146) What is the significance of the story within a story?
2. Bryan and his mother both have choices to make. What are they, and how do they resonate?
3. In all three stories we have an adult Bryan looking back at his much younger self. What has he learned from these stories that you can hear from the voice that tells us these stories?
4. "Poor Mother. Then decided: But poor Grand here, too. Poor all of us eventually and now." (p. 172) What does Gurganus mean by this?
5. Near the end of the story, Bryan asks, "What can a person do?" (p. 177) Do you feel the stories in this collection give us any answers to this question?
6. What do we learn from the stories that our elders pass down to us?

This novella is the capstone of the collection:

"Blessed Assurance"

1. Why is this story subtitled "A Moral Tale?"
2. "You know how it is, once a crowd splits into separate faces, nothing can ever mash them back into that first safe shape." (p. 211) What does this story tell us about our preconceptions and stereotyping of others? How are these preconceptions and stereotyping confounded in the narrator's experiences in the story? How are we still dealing with trying to find individual faces in the "safe shape" blended crowd in our community?
3. "Working through a what? Well, child, we all gots to get through something, seem like." (p. 197) What is Jerry still working through all these years later? In *The Things They Carried* soldiers carry physical and emotional burdens. What burdens did Jerry carry as a young man and does he still carry now?
4. What do we know about Miss Battle? What does Jerry think he knows about her? What does she tell us about herself?

5. "I almost thought of her as mine." (p. 220) What face does exploitation wear in this story?
6. What does Jerry learn by going to the funeral?
7. Can you keep your heart out of any job?
8. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, Grant learns from Jackson; here Jerry learns from Miss Battle. What do we learn in unexpected places? How do we stay open to new life lessons?
9. "We all have our crimes. Right?" (p. 250) What does this say about our world today?

In conclusion:

"Still, I understand certain basics: Everybody expects a few sure things, a bit of blessed assurance. A person wants to feel covered." (p. 251) What basics have you come to understand through reading *White People*?