

All About Lulu –Reading Group Guide

Suggested questions for discussion:

1. Will often voices his disdain for his brothers and father—how do you think he really feels about them?
2. Did you think that the author intended to “hide” Lulu’s identity from the reader? Did you guess Lulu’s identity before it was revealed explicitly near the end? If so, how did this information color your perception of Will?
3. What was the most humorous aspect of the novel for you? The most emotionally affecting?
4. In what ways do you think the death of Will’s mother most impacted his life?
5. Why do you think the author included Will’s college philosophy papers? How did these essays enhance your perception of Will?
6. There are a fairly large cast of secondary and peripheral characters—did you have a favorite? Why?
7. Why do you think the author chose to bestow twin brothers on Will?
8. Why do you think the author chose to bestow a small penis on Will?
9. How does Will’s perception of himself change throughout the novel? What, in your mind, were some of the turning points in his self-perception?
10. What similarities do you see between Lulu and Big Bill? Will and Big Bill? Lulu and Will?
11. Were there any metaphors at work in the novel that resonated for you?
12. What do you think the Millers say about America? About family? Do you think there is any geo-political significance to the story’s time frame, setting, or character dynamic?
13. Why do you think the author titled the book “All About Lulu?”

A conversation with Jonathan Evison

(from Knock—interview by Bryan Tomasovich)

KNOCK: How much of *All About Lulu* is autobiographical?

EIVISON: Hmm. Tough question. 27.9 percent—maybe 28? I *did* grow up in a family of bodybuilders, I *was* a talk radio host, girls with poodle hair *are* invariably attracted to me, but that's about it. At the same time, it's all true, you know? There's fact, then there's truth. I'm not much concerned with fact—it's the other that floats my boat. I just wanted to write a book about American family life, the American dream, and I wanted to write a book that had the pitch and velocity of adolescence. The longing, the absurdity, the heartache, the awkwardness, it's all true to my experience; the sets are just dressed differently in most cases.

KNOCK: You say *American*, and reading the blurbs etcetera, it seems like everybody says something about the novel being American, what is it that's so American about this novel, do you think?

EIVISON: Aside from some of the historical earmarks, I'm guessing it has something to do with this idea of possibilities—the difference between where we come from and where we can go. America simply offers more latitude in this respect than many places. Not to say that there's not a very complex and often debilitating class structure in place in America, not to say the dictates and obstacles are the same for the various social and economic strata, but the fact remains— whether or not we've got our collective tail between our legs and we're compelled to sew maple leafs onto our jean jackets when we travel abroad, whether or not a small percentage of entitled fucks are doing their damndest to limit the rest of us in our pursuit of liberty and freedom and happiness, whether or not you think the constitution is a load of shit, or you believe John Wayne was gay— the American dream is alive and well. Ask the Mexican working in your garden if you don't believe me. I guess my novel is optimistic in this respect, and Americans— from Walt Whitman to Donald Rumsfeld— are nothing if not optimistic. So, yeah, I

guess that's maybe what's so American about my novel. Or the fact that there's so many hot dogs in it.

KNOCK: Why bodybuilding?

EVISON: Well, for starters, because I spent much of my childhood around it—I have a pretty intimate knowledge of the sport. Bodybuilding really relates thematically to the book in a number of ways. The idea of strength. Discipline. Definition. Self-improvement. Dualism, in the Cartesian sense—you know, here is Will, this guy raised in an environment where everything is measured in mounds of muscle and flesh, and where does he find his center but in a disembodied voice?

KNOCK: What about the Miller obsession with meat?

EVISON: Let's face it, meat is funny. And, of course, you've got half the dualism equation again.

KNOCK: The book really isn't *all about Lulu*, is it?

EVISON: Nah, it's Will's story. Lulu was never intended to be the narrative engine. I would liken Lulu's role to a shadow of an even bigger shadow under which Will lives much of his life— and out from under which he must emerge to discover himself. Some editors—big house editors, *ahem*— were frustrated by this. But it's called *All About Lulu*, they said. We need more Lulu! Where is Lulu when *this* happens, and *that* happens? Pretty dumb questions, as far as I'm concerned. I say to them: Why isn't *Lolita* called *Humbert Humbert*?

KNOCK: You've been critical about the commercial publishing industry, specifically their treatment of literary fiction, could you elucidate?

EVISON: Well, it's not the commercial part that troubles me, exactly. It's corporate practices and group-think mentality that are strangling the American novel—and certainly the novel is not unique in this respect. What troubles me specifically, is the title-driven market. This *likeness* factor which seems to be dictating everything from

acquisitions to jacket designs. No wonder our literature isn't flourishing! No wonder there's a dearth of originality! Christ, how many books in the last year feature vintage lamp shades or a woman holding an apple in her hand on the cover? How many books are called *The So-and-So's Daughter*? It used to be about the author. Steinbeck wrote at least four commercial flops before he broke out. The current paradigm simply doesn't allow for that. If you don't break out with your first novel, your book is remaindered, and you're contemplating a name change. That's the corporation at work—the quarterly return, the quick buck. See, the family business sets its sights on the long-term, the corporation just wants to turn a quick buck. The irony of this is that they're shooting themselves in the foot. A lot of people have one novel, or one memoir in them. The real resource is the people that have ten in them—the people that *can't help* but produce. Instead of trying to catch lightning in a bottle with the next *Kite Runner*, the next *Eat, Pray, Love*, the next *Water for Elephants*, they should be building long-term readerships for their authors. It's the authors who should be dictating what's relevant, not the bean-counters and the marketing stooges.

KNOCK: Who are some authors who have influenced your work?

EVISON: First and foremost, probably Dickens. He taught me to create my characters with love, he taught me to juggle them, he taught me to put them through hell, and he taught me not to forsake them, even in death. I was extremely enamored of John Fante in my adolescence. It was partly a peasant thing, and partly a writerly thing—his whole hopelessly youthful and unapologetic brand of fear and arrogance really spoke to me. I connected with Steinbeck early on, as well. His characters were so conflicted. Nothing is more compelling to me than a conflicted character. Old Fyodor, too, for that matter, influenced me in this way. Bohumil Hrabal, everybody's favorite Czech pub crawler and dirty old man, also made a big impression on me with his sensuality and huge appetites. I wanna grow old like Hrabal.

KNOCK: What about contemporary writers?

EVISON: Jim Othmer, Keith Dixon, Tim Sandlin. Writers who reinvent themselves every time they take a crack at the novel. I like David Mitchell for his ambition, I like Michael Chabon for his silky prose, I like Sam Lipsyte for his irreverence.

KNOCK: What's next for you?

EVISON: As far as writing, I've been working on a real beast for the past two years—three, if you count the research. It's very different from Lulu. It's called *West of Here*. It's much larger in scope. Third person, a gazillion POVs. Bigfoot, naked Indians, Colonel Sanders, a lot of ecological destruction. Maybe it's a disaster, but I don't care, it's exhilarating if nothing else, though at times a little overwhelming. I have to wake up at five in the morning six days a week just to keep a handle on it. But the end is in sight, and probably none too soon—just look at me. After that, I'll probably just rent *White Lines* with Jan Michael Vincent, drink a bunch of beer in my sweatpants, then maybe go back to the Galapagos for a couple of months and ruminate.

KNOCK: Any sage advice for novelists trying to break out?

EVISON: Work your ass off until you're too exhausted and too discouraged to go on—then work twice as hard. And quit saving those damn rejection letters—unless they've got some substantive editorial insight, throw the fuckers away! Burn them! Bury them, whatever, just release them and concentrate on the word. Don't lose sight of why you're putting yourself through all of the labor and suffering and isolation. If you're doing it to be published—congratulations, you're a douchebag. If you're doing it because you *have to*, because you feel the compulsion to articulate the often times inarticulate, if you're doing it to inspire yourself and try and make sense out of the senseless, to rush at unseen truths for the sake of understanding, well, then, eventually you'll break through, if you work hard enough. Eventually could mean fifteen years and two failed marriages and no dental insurance. It could mean driving around town in some broke-dick Datsun, dragging your bumper. It could mean eating a lot of fishcakes. A LOT of fishcakes. But you'll break through. Also, have some self-respect—I know, I know, it's cold out there, but seriously, you've got to self-identify as a writer. If you're at party or something and

someone asks you: "So, anything published?" Don't start stammering and explaining and trying to save face. Just tell them to stick their thumb up their asses, and go find a cute girl to flirt with. Write to grow and understand and challenge yourself, not to publish.

A few of Jonathan Evison's favorite books (in no particular order) and brief commentary:

David Copperfield – Charles Dickens

The ultimate coming of age novel. Characters that stay with you your whole life.

Don Quixote – Miguel de Cervantes

Show me a man or a woman who isn't fighting windmills, and I'll show you a dishonest person.

Call of the Wild – Jack London

Every time I re-read this book I feel some primordial connection to the wilderness. This book reads like a campfire.

The Brothers Karamozov – Fyodor Dostoyevsky

Maybe I'm weird, but I thought this was a real page-turner.

Gilead – Marilynne Robinson

Forgiveness is a powerful thing.

Trout Fishing in America – Richard Brautigan

Below its goofy sensibility and off-beat wit, there's something beautiful and delicate at work in this book—a clear-eyed, perceptive moral vision of the world. Or maybe I'm just stoned.

