

A Reader's Guide

TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

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Questions for Discussion

1. In some ways, the book's end returns to its beginning. Lucy and her sister, Molly, whose correspondence opens the first chapter, are reunited at the conclusion. We are also again given the same description of the house "built of limestone and blue granite." Thus, although the Mehmel family has apparently collapsed, the cyclical nature of the book implies that perhaps all is not lost, and that life will continue. What do you think? Is there hope for the Mehmels? Can you imagine the family healing itself — financially, physically, emotionally? The novel details decades of collapse, disintegration, and tragedy — but does it end hopelessly?
2. This book is notable for the absence of a clear protagonist. Although the role loosely seems to belong to Felix Mehmel, this is not always the case. At various times throughout the book different characters "take over" the role and the narrative temporarily assumes their viewpoint. These secondary protagonists include Lucy Mehmel, Leo Mehmel, and Rabbi Nathan Gernsbacher. Why do you think Taylor eschews one clearly identifiable main protagonist in favor of several? What does this achieve?

3. It comes as no surprise to learn that Taylor hails from Texas, which is also the setting for his novel. Like William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County or Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio, the sleepy city of Galveston emerges, throughout the course of the book, as vividly as any of its inhabitants. Can you find some examples of how Taylor's writing accomplishes this effect? Whether you still live there or not, does your original hometown reside with equal power in your own memories?
4. Although the book takes place a century ago, many of the themes it contains are very relevant to the modern day. One of these is the question of immigration. Midway through the book, Truley says, "We got us a passel of strange folks come to town . . . Jews, they are, from Russia." Later, Deputy Purvis expresses the less-neutral continuation of this thought: "These folks get to town, find their own kind . . . talk their own language, follow their own customs. And what have you got before long? A ghetto, I believe they call it. And a ghetto we in Galveston don't need." The Mexican border occupies the forefront of today's immigration debates, but there remain many similarities to early twentieth-century Galveston. How would you address Purvis's fear? He seems to believe

that assimilation is not an inevitable product of immigration — do you agree? Should it be? What is gained — or lost — by the interactions of different cultures that immigration produces?

5. Religion is another prominent issue in this book — or rather, religions. Caught between these is Lucy Pumphrey Mehmel — a born Catholic who left her New Orleans family in order to marry a Texan Jew, Aharon Mehmel. As a result Lucy became estranged from her family. Was there a way the family could have better dealt with her decision? If faced with a child's decision to change his or her faith, how would you react?
6. As a continuation of question 5, think about how, at the book's end, Lucy has become a sick and broken woman. Throughout the novel, her ongoing struggle in regard to religion emerges as a likely cause. This can be seen within the first pages of the book, where she is acutely conscious of not only the mezuzah on her door but also of the cross hidden around her neck. What are some other moments in the book where Lucy struggles with the choices she has made concerning her religion? At times, she seems to want to have it both ways — is it fair or right of her to desire or expect this? As the book progresses, she turns to the city's

two religious leaders — priest and rabbi — for assistance. Does she receive it from them? How is she treated by these two figures? Do you agree with their responses to her dilemma?

7. The book opens with a somewhat strange sentence: “That was the house where the Jews lived.” This sentence does not seem to be spoken by any one particular character. Who do you think is speaking here — whose voice? Whose sentiment does it express? How do you take its tone? Why do you think Taylor chooses to open his book with this sentence?
8. Over the course of the summer that the book is primarily set in, Felix undergoes significant change in several respects. One of these is his friendship with Wick. How did you read this relationship, and everything that ensues from it — as a corruption, or as a more positive enlightenment? There seem to be instances that would support both of these arguments — can you think of any specific examples? Or is their friendship neither of these?
9. By the end of the book, the roles of Felix and Wick have undergone a striking reversal. This becomes most noticeable as Felix prepares to steal and fly the glider: “Tell you what, Wick Frawley, you let me do the thinking. Simpler

that way.” Soon afterward Felix shouts at his friend, “Where the hell’s your self-respect?” — a scornful question that was originally spoken by Wick. What events do you think caused this change in Felix? Do the consequences — his subsequent crash and near-death — justify this newfound strength of his? How do you think Felix will be changed by this final trauma?

10. The book presents two parallel sets of siblings: Lucy and Molly Pumphrey, and Aharon and Leo Mehmel. Both pairs share a certain discrepancy between them. As children, Lucy is beautiful and popular, while Molly is unattractive and, furthermore, an illegitimate child. Likewise, Aharon, in his youth, far outshines his brother Leo. Yet Aharon dies while Leo lives, and eventually it is Molly who must make the trip to Galveston to reunite with — and aid — her helpless sister. Do these events come as surprises? What purpose might Taylor have here? Does Taylor’s situation subvert normal expectations of “promising” and “unpromising” children, whether these judgments are made unconsciously or otherwise? What are your own thoughts on the (perhaps inevitable) jealousy between siblings? Do you find this jealousy to exist in this book?

11. Lucy must face a remarkably explicit and physical sign of her husband's infidelity. Discuss how she handles this betrayal. In a situation as difficult as this, perhaps there is no "right" thing to do. Do you agree with her actions? Is she right to take back her husband?
12. The most mysterious character in the book is the old immigrant, Schmulowicz, and Taylor adds to this sense by describing him by means of a series of oxymoronic comparisons. Thus we learn that Schmulowicz, although old, can appear startlingly youthful, that he "stank of life and death," that he emits a sound "that was both laughter and tears." What do you think Taylor wishes to achieve through these descriptions? Think about Schmulowicz's actions after his arrival. The puppet shows that he puts on have a hypnotic affect on the viewers, who leave the boathouse in a trancelike state. When Felix is bitten by a deadly cottonmouth, Schmulowicz heals him. When he finally departs, "a brace of crows, oily bright, came down to feed him bread and meat." This sort of writing creates an effect that could loosely be termed "magical realism," in the style of South American writers Gabriel García Márquez or Jorge Luis Borges. Talk about this style. What is achieved by departing from reality in this manner? Is anything

simultaneously lost? What might prompt an author to thus abandon an otherwise realistic world, and why might he do so?

13. Taylor concludes his book with a penultimate paragraph that begins: “Secret is: to know the outcomes the long way back.” What do you think he is saying in these last few sentences? Can we make any guesses about the eventual outcome for the Mehmel family — particularly Felix — based on these lines?
14. The final paragraph gives us several apparently innocuous and unrelated details. Water is poured, fruit falls from trees. What might be Taylor’s strategy for ending on this note? What is he doing — and what mood is he creating — with his language here? Take another look at question 1. After rereading these closing paragraphs do you agree with the initial conclusions you drew there?