

A Reader's Guide

Questions to facilitate discussion of

The Book of Getting Even, by Benjamin Taylor

1. Within Gabriel Geismar's life, Milton Geismar occupies two roles: that of a Rabbi, and that of a father. As seen as early as p. 1, these roles often exist with striking independence from each other. As a Rabbi, Milton is forgiving, kind, and understanding; as a father he can be brutish, violent, and unsympathetic. Discuss some examples of this dichotomy in the book, and in your own experience. How does this characteristic create tension in the book?
2. Throughout his childhood, Gabriel evinces a powerful antagonism to religion that is matched only by his enthusiasm for science. On p. 20, we read that "For 'faith' Gabriel had substituted 'finding out.'" What do you think of this attitude? Do you think faith and reason — or the scientific method — are mutually exclusive?
3. As a continuation of Question 2, consider the two men who hold greatest influence over Gabriel — his father, a Rabbi, and Professor Hundert, a scientist. Both could be said to be literal representations of the two ways he is pulled throughout the book. Do you think Gabriel's personal feelings for each influenced his opinions on religion and science? Or might it have been the other way around?
4. As a freshman at Swathmore, Gabriel notices that "These northern people had a way of priding themselves unduly on their opinions... Conversation in New Orleans wasn't like that. You conversed in order to agree." Based on your own experience, do you agree with this characterization of Northerners and Southerners? Can you think of any other social differences that you have noticed between people from different geographic areas?

5. As Gabriel meets his fellow undergraduates, many of them are described with noticeably unflattering words. Descriptions include “beaky, dry-as-dust, spotty, heavysset, ferret-eyed, persnickety, bleak, baleful, ludicrous.” Why do you think the author chooses to have Gabriel notice his peers in this unflattering light? Interestingly, in spite of these observations Gabriel decides “he liked them all.” What does this say about his character at this early juncture?
6. When meeting the Hundert parents on p. 34, Gabriel is immediately overcome by love for Mrs. Hundert and profound admiration for Professor Hundert. Do you think this surge of emotion stems more from Gabriel’s own family’s deficiencies – flaws he is so keenly aware of – or would it exist regardless? Consider Gabriel throughout the book. Does he usually become quickly enamored of the various characters he encounters, or does he hold back?
7. On p. 43 Gabriel observes Mr. and Mrs. Hundert, forgetting that “before the curtain falls, Othello and Desdemona must be the death of each other.” This foreshadowing stands out noticeably for its strength. Why do you think the author chooses to send such a strong message here? Are there other places in the book where he uses this technique? And if not, why do you think he employs it only in this one instance?
8. On p. 46 Danny attacks Gabriel, asking, “What’s this mania of yours, anyhow, always wanting to know the *Jewish* contribution to everything?” This question exposes an apparent contradiction in Gabriel – his simultaneous antagonism towards, and fascination with, his religion. Are these at odds with each other? Judaism is often called a culture as much as a religion. Does thinking of it as the former help explain Gabriel’s seemingly contradictory attitude? With any faith, is it possible to separate religion from culture? Do you, with regard to your own?

9. On p. 49, in one of the most arresting scenes in the book, Gabriel takes a belt and beats his father as the latter lies helplessly in bed. Discuss this moment. Can Gabriel be excused for doing this? Do Milton's earlier actions justify this attack?
10. The beginning of Part Two finds Gabriel a graduate student in Chicago. Considering the universe, he thinks that "perhaps he hadn't come so far from Terpsichore Street after all since, soberly considered, he was only putting eternal Nature where the eternal God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob used to be." This passage suggests that he has been at least partially able to reconcile his beliefs on science and religion. Discuss his logic here. Do you agree with it? Take another look at Question 2 – do his earlier and later opinions contradict each other? How have his views changed? What else does this moment say about the progress and maturation of Gabriel as a young man?
11. On p. 121 Marghie tells Gabriel that she is engaged, but he stops listening to her: "For suddenly there was bigger news by far... the luna, perched at the windowsill..." Most would not agree that a moth at a window is more important than a best friend's engagement. Why do you think the author juxtaposes these moments, and – through Gabriel – places such a greater emphasis on one than the other?
12. On p. 132, just before Berto leaves him, Gabriel thinks that "love was the collision of two fantasies... each dark to the other." Read this passage with an eye to the language. Is Gabriel simply bitter here, or do you think this expresses a more genuine and permanent conviction of his? Do you think his point has merit? Can you think of anyone you know whose relationship would bear this out?
13. At the book's end, Mrs. Hundert – her husband's mind devastated by memory loss – makes a significant and controversial decision for the two of them. Can you sympathize with this act? Did she have the right to do this, or is Marghie correct when she refuses to forgive her mother?

14. Near the book's end, Gabriel considers the two sets of adults closest to him, and wonders "Why did Gregor and Lilo Hundert merit his rapt study while Milton and Rowena Geismar went to the sour-apple heap? Or had he been studying Milton and Rowena all along? Had he been exalting them... by means of a substitution?" Discuss this passage. What is your opinion on these questions Gabriel asks himself? Do you agree with him? Or are these merely the thoughts of a guilty son trying to justify his break with his biological parents? Is it possible to 'exalt by substitution?' How do you take this phrase?
15. As the book concludes, we find Gabriel considering insects, just as he was on its first page. But rather than killing them, he instead is filled with contentment: "Something makes the moment holy rather than intelligible." Much of the book has revolved around Gabriel's struggle to come to terms with his own character, split as it was between his awareness of religion and his belief in science. Discuss this conclusion. What does it suggest about Gabriel's ultimate decision regarding these two areas, and their place within his life? On the book's first page we see the word "experiment;" on its last we see "holy." Just his willingness to use the latter word suggests that Gabriel has come a long way from his childhood. Where do we leave him?