

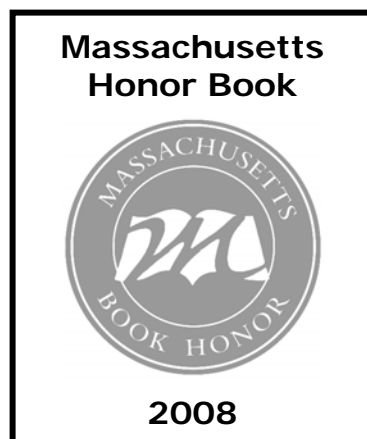
## A Reading and Discussion Guide

### *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*

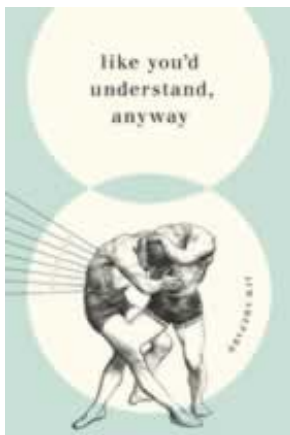
By Jim Shepard

Alfred A. Knopf

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Brockton Public Library



#### SUMMARY



*Like You'd Understand Anyway* is a collection of eleven short stories told from the first-person point of view, with mostly male narrators caught up in the course of events, contemporary and historical – including the chief engineer of the Soviet Department of Nuclear Energy at the time of the Chernobyl power plant disaster, a Texas high school football player, a twelve-year-old boy at summer camp, and the chief public executioner in the French Revolution.

#### Individual Stories

"The Zero Meter Diving Team." Guilt over the death of his younger brother Mikhail in the explosion of one of four nuclear reactors in the Chernobyl power station causes the chief engineer of the Soviet Union's Department of Nuclear Energy ("half technocrat, half bureaucrat") to alternately rage and despair over an entrenched culture of corruption, nepotism, and willful blindness.

"Proto-Scorpions of the Silurian." A seventh-grader relates his observations of how a series of small household and family annoyances one rainy morning cause his mentally ill older brother to "go off" while doing nothing himself to prevent the explosion that he knows is coming.

"Hadrian's Wall." Clerk Felicius Victor writes down for posterity his impressions of military life on the outskirts of the Roman empire, describing how troops, far from their own homeland and weakened by illness, guard against invasion.

"Trample the Dead, Hurdle the Weak." A defensive player at a Texas high school football powerhouse with a long-absent father is obsessed with the idea that an exceptional offensive player on another team is actually his half-brother.

"Ancestral Legacies." A doomed team of two scientists from Nazi Germany, though ostensibly in the inhospitable region of the Chang Tang on a political mission ("Operation Tibet"), is actually on the lookout for the mysterious *yeti*, commonly known as the abominable snowman.

"Pleasure Boating in Lituya Bay." An Alaskan pilot, deserted by his mother at a young age, is unable to find comfort in marriage and fatherhood – secretly scheduling a vasectomy, despite his wife's desire for another child.

"The First South Central Australian Expedition." A determined expedition leader in 1840 is obsessed with the idea of discovering an inland sea in the middle of Australia's vast, forbidding desert region.

"My Aeschylus." From a young age, words and visions have come unbidden to Aeschylus, a playwright later known to prosperity as the father of the Greek tragedy, and, now in his forties, he reflects on his family and the death of his oldest brother as he fights against the Persians alongside his other brother at Marathon.

"Eros 7." Obsessively in love with her male counterpart already in solo orbit above the earth in *Vostok 5*, the first female cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova writes a diary of her selection and her mission into space onboard the Soviet spacecraft *Vostok 6* in 1963.

"Courtesy for Beginners." Dropped off at what must truly be the worst summer camp ever so his parents can deal with his younger brother's mental health issues, a twelve-year-old boy detachedly observes the behavior of campers, a sadistic counselor, and himself.

"Sans Farine." A public executioner is kept busy during the French Revolution, suffering privately the death of a son and the withdrawal of his once loving wife.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What themes did you notice running through the stories in this collection?
2. What concerns or issues do the different narrators of the stories share?
3. What type of relationship do the mostly male narrators of these stories have with women? Why are so many (all?) of the narrators unhappy?
4. Why did the author title the first story, "The Zero Meter Diving Team"? How does Boris' description of their father's teaching him and his two younger brothers to dive into shallow water set the stage for the rest of the story? (p. 4)
5. What was the most chilling aspect of the story "The Zero Meter Diving Team"? How does the description of the Soviet government's Department of Nuclear Energy make you feel about the potential for another accident on the scale of Chernobyl? [Note: According to an article by Adam Federman in *The Nation* published on April 25, 2006, "Remembering Chernobyl," "the world's industrialized powers are laying the groundwork for a massive capital investment in nuclear technology."]
6. There is still no real agreement on how many people died as a result of the accident at Chernobyl or will die from related cancer. Estimates range from 4,000 to over 500,000. Why does the author choose to focus his story on a family like the Prushinskys? How are they "like their country," in being "first to protest that no one should waste any pity on *them*. Because the Prushinskys have always made their own luck."? (p. 3)
7. What does the story, "The Zero Meter Diving Team", imply about the relationship between humans and technology? What about the relationship between technocrats and bureaucrats? [Note: Boris says, "As chief engineer of the Department of Nuclear Energy, I was a mongrel: half technocrat, half bureaucrat." (p. 7)]
8. Boris' brother Mikhail dies from radiation exposure three weeks after the Chernobyl reactor explosion, while his half-brother Petya, the black sheep of the family, lives. Two years later, their father muses, "It's a shame." and Boris asks what, "wild with rage at the both of us." How

is Boris like his father? How is he unlike him? Why doesn't his father feel as guilty as Boris about the accident at Chernobyl?

9. On his publisher's web site, author Jim Shepard is quoted as saying: "My brother and I (he's five years older) have always been close, and separate, and that's been a great source of emotional complexity and intensity in my psychic life. One of the great traumas in my family's experience (and my family's been mostly very lucky in that regard) was his institutionalization when he was about 16. It was an event that crystallized for me concrete forms for the kinds of issues—how much should one help? what constitutes help?—that always swirl around crucial family relationships." How are these issues illustrated in the story, "Proto-Scorpions of the Silurian"?
10. In the story "Hadrian's Wall," narrator Felicius Victor writes about the way the Roman empire's outer borders expand by absorbing territories that will then fight against the newer frontier territory: "That's been Rome's genius all along: turning brother against brother and father against son. Since what could have been easier than that?" How does this comment relate to Felicius' relationship with his father, Annius Equester, and his brother, Chrauttius, before his death?
11. How has Felicius' standing in the family possibly affected his behavior and social standing at the Wall? Do you think Felicius is telling the truth when he tells his father he does not miss his brother (p. 42)? Why does his father not tell his wife what Felicius has said?
12. Why would the author name his character "Felicius Victor", meaning "happy victor", and have the character almost immediately tell us: "All day, every day, I'm sad." How is Felicius' position of scribe or clerk both important and unimportant in a military context?
13. Do you think the author wrote "Hadrian's Wall" with the United States in mind, at all? Why or why not?
14. "Trample the Dead, Hurdle the Weak" is the fourth story in the collection and the fourth story about characters with "brother issues" (p. 50). How do Wainwright's "brother issues" compare with the narrator's? How do the narrator's issues with his older brother compare to those of the narrator in "Proto-Scorpions of the Silurian"?
15. In "Trample the Dead, Hurdle the Weak," why do you think the narrator never mentions his own first name or his brother's, only his possible half-brother Corey's? [Note: "Big Coach calls us by our hometowns if he doesn't remember our names. I'm Paducah. The weakside guy alongside Wainwright is Cee Vee. Wainwright's Wainwright." p. 51]
16. What is the narrator's attitude towards Wainwright's being the best player on the team, "a blue chipper's blue chipper"? (p. 48) What does he mean when he compares himself to Wainwright by saying: "...there are mean dogs and mad dogs, and it's not easy to make the leap."?
17. Would the narrator in "Trample the Dead, Hurdle the Weak" have trodden on Wainwright to make the play, the way Wainwright does to him at the end of the story? Why does Wainwright do it?
18. Do you think Corey really is the narrator's half-brother? Why or why not?
19. It is never explained why the narrator's family moved from New Jersey to Texas after the father left. Do you think the brothers are right that their mother is lying when she says she never heard from their father again? (p.50) [Note: She says later to her younger son that she would tell him

- if she knew where his father was. (p. 58)] How does the loss of their father affect the narrator and his older brother differently?
20. Why does Wainwright say, "You have no idea who I am, do you?" (p. 52), when the narrator asks him yet another question about Corey?
  21. In the story "Ancestral Legacies," Ernst Schafer and his assistant, Beger, are ostensibly in Tibet's inhospitable mountainous desert region, the Chang Tang, on a political mission, but are actually in search of the yeti, commonly known as the abominable snowman. How is Nazi scientist Ernst Schafer like or unlike the leader of the expedition into Australia's interior in the story "The First South Central Australian Expedition"?
  22. Did you feel sympathetic towards Schafer and Beger on their quest for proof of the yeti's existence? How did you understand the ending of the story?
  23. Although Schafer mostly has nothing but disdain for the Tibetan people, he does wonder whether a certain gene might make them "equal, if not superior" to Germans in "inventiveness", after he watches the Tibetan porters rig up a sling for the food. (p. 73) What is ironic about this observation, in relation to the recent footprints in the dried ground (p. 67), the disappearance of the first tethered yak (p. 74), and the strange taste of the barley beer the night before the porters leave (p. 76)?
  24. Why is the unnamed narrator in the story "Pleasure Boating in Lituya Bay" obsessed with the July 9, 1958 earthquake and tsunami in Lituya Bay? How is it related to his childhood, his marriage, and his wife's desire to have another child? [Note: "...I realized how much I depended on having made her happy. And how much all of that shook when she whacked at it." (pp. 90-1)]
  25. Why is the narrator's relationship to his seven-year-old son, Donald, so difficult for him? Why does he imagine tsunami survivor Howard Ulrich's son, Sonny, as having grown up to be "just like the old man"? (p. 99)
  26. What is the significance of the title, "Pleasure Boating in Lituya Bay"? How is it ironic?
  27. In "My Aeschylus," why does Aeschylus, the narrator, describe himself at the end as "a sad hollow son born to bring home misfortune, to initiate the roll of grief" (p. 142)?
  28. Aeschylus seems to feel he is somehow responsible for his oldest brother's death, partly from the oracle's saying, "look to the youngest," and partly because he did not mourn for his brother as much as his parents and other brother did. How is this related to the words that come to him out of the blue? [Note: "And when a mortal is taken into a god's confidence, that mortal brings everyone bad fortune." (p. 135)]
  29. What is Aeschylus' relationship to his older brother Kynegeiros like? How did he feel to battle alongside him as a grown man when he had never been old enough to play war games with him as a child?
  30. Historians consider the battles at Marathon and Salamis turning points for Greek civilization, which went on to flourish for the next 200 years. What is Aeschylus' attitude towards the invading Persians?
  31. In 1963, Valentina Tereshkova became the first woman in space, but it was 19 years before another female astronaut enters space. Why do you think the author imagined the interior life of the actual Soviet cosmonaut the way he did in "Eros 7"?

32. How do the characters of Valentina Tereshkova and her back-up, Irina Solovyova, differ? [Note: "If I've occasionally taken first place in life's races, it's only because of my oxlike perseverance." (p. 147)]
33. Why does Tereshkova become romantically obsessed with her married fellow cosmonaut, Valery Bykovsky? What happens to her during her isolation in space? [Note: "What had I expected? I wasn't sure. I still wasn't sure." (p. 159)]
34. How does the author portray the Soviet space program in this story, especially in the choice of Tereshkova over the other female candidates?
35. In the story "Courtesy for Beginners," the narrator is sent to summer camp while his parents deal with his younger brother's mental health problems. How is the older brother in this story like the older brother in "The Zero Meter Diving Team" or the younger brother in "Proto-Scorpions of the Silurian"?
36. What part does the character of the unnamed "fat kid" in the story play for the also unnamed narrator at the "worst camp anybody's ever seen" (p. 183)?
37. What feelings does the story "Courtesy for Beginners" leave you with?
38. How does executioner Charles-Henri Sanson in "Sans Farine" see his role differently from his wife? [Notes: "I am the instrument, and it is justice that strikes." (p. 186) "'Your terrible stroke,' she responds." (p. 207)]
39. Why do people view an executioner and a soldier differently? ["Ask any soldier what his profession entails. He'll answer that he kills men. No one flees his company for that reason." (p. 197)]
40. Did the story "Sans Farine" make you think of the French Revolution in a new way? If so, how?
41. How does the death of their younger son Gabriel affect the marriage of Sanson and his wife Anne-Marie? What did Gabriel symbolize for Anne-Marie? [Note: "He'd wanted to try his hand at another profession, and Anne-Marie had wished the same for him." (p. 193)]

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born on December 29, 1956, in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Jim Shepard graduated from Trinity College in 1978, and obtained an M.F.A. from Brown in 1980. He is married to novelist Karen Shepard, and they have three children. He is currently J. Leland Miller Professor of English at Williams College in Williamstown, Mass.

Jim Shepard has written six novels for adults; three collections of his short stories have been published; and he has co-authored six books for young adults with William Holinger, under the pseudonym Scott Eller. He has also edited collections of stories and poems.

In 2005, Shepard received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Award. He won the 2008 Story Award, which comes with a \$20,000 prize, for *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*. The story collection was also a National Book Award for 2007.

Many of the stories in *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*, include historical figures, and involve a lot of research. In an email interview published online, Shepard writes about the relationship of research to his writing:

"My reading gives way to stories, in your phrase, in that what happens is that I'm often reading all kinds of strange stuff—the history of guillotines, or the assembled lore about the Yeti—just for my own pleasure, and then some of the details that I come across seem plangent to me. They're emotionally resonant in ways that seem simultaneously evocative and a little mysterious. The fact that the details remain with me tells me that that they're touching on something in terms of my own emotional life that I want to further explore. At that point, I begin researching as though I may be writing a story: in other words, to fill in gaps in my knowledge of whatever world and sensibility I'm considering trying to construct." (*Memorius 10*)

In an interview on the Random House Web site, Shepard answers a question about the theme of brotherhood that runs through many of the stories in *Like You'd Understand, Anyway*:

"I think the brother relationship in general is intensely useful to me for the way it puts so much pressure on our sense of what it means to love someone unconditionally, and especially on the issues of connection and samaritanism. My brother and I (he's five years older) have always been close, and separate, and that's been a great source of emotional complexity and intensity in my psychic life. One of the great traumas in my family's experience (and my family's been mostly very lucky in that regard) was his institutionalization when he was about 16. It was an event that crystallized for me concrete forms for the kinds of issues—how much should one help? what constitutes help?—that always swirl around crucial family relationships."

In the same interview, Shepard is asked about the "folly of adventure" in stories like *The First South Central Australian Expedition* and *Ancestral Legacies*:

"I find that sort of striving impossibly admirable, and moving, and also impossibly stupid, and selfish. It produces in me the kind of complicated feeling that those who are moved by Tennyson's poem about the Light Brigade might feel, I suppose."

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Ancient History: Romans: Hadrian's Wall Gallery. BBC Web site.

[www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/hadrian\\_gallery\\_01.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/hadrian_gallery_01.shtml) Photos of and information about the construction and function of Hadrian's Wall.

Biography of Aeschylus. Intellectual Heritage Program of Temple University. Retrieved from [www.temple.edu/ih/Aeschylus/Biography/index.htm](http://www.temple.edu/ih/Aeschylus/Biography/index.htm) on 10/12/08.

Chernobyl.info. [www.chernobyl.info](http://www.chernobyl.info) Detailed information, including a chronology of events, related to the nuclear reactor explosion at Chernobyl in the Ukraine in April, 1986.

Federman, Adam. Remembering Chernobyl. *The Nation*, April 25, 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060508/federman> on 10/5/08.

Rozell, Ned. *Lituya Bay's Deadly Waves - Natural Alaska*, includes a link to Howard Ulrich's story in the October 1958 issue of *The Alaska Sportsman*. Retrieved on 10/5/08 from [http://www.alaskamagazine.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=981&Itemid=321](http://www.alaskamagazine.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=981&Itemid=321)

Valentina Tereshkova. 2005. Retrieved from [www.bookrags.com/research/valentina-tereshkova-ued/](http://www.bookrags.com/research/valentina-tereshkova-ued/) on 10/5/08.

## OTHER INFORMATION

Author Jim Shepard answers questions about his work, in particular *Like You'd Understand, Anyway* in Author Q & A, Random House:

[www.randomhouse.com/knopf/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307265210&view=printqa](http://www.randomhouse.com/knopf/catalog/display.pperl?isbn=9780307265210&view=printqa) .

Contemporary Authors Online, Gale, 2008. Jim Shepard. Reproduced in Biography Resource Center. Farmington Hills, Mich.: Gale, 2008. <http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/BioRC>

Shepard, Jim. Why Men Do Crazy Things. *Oprah Magazine*.

[www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200807\\_omag\\_men\\_crazy/1](http://www.oprah.com/article/omagazine/200807_omag_men_crazy/1)

van den Berg, Laura. An Interview with Jim Shepard. *Memorius*, 10. [www.memorious.org/?id=231](http://www.memorious.org/?id=231)

### FOR FURTHER READING

In addition to books the author lists in the front of *Like You'd Understand, Anyway* as source material, the following titles may be interesting follow-ups to some of the stories:

Alexievich, Svetlana. *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. Gessen, Keith, trans. Dalkey Archive, 2005.

Dietrich, William. *Hadrian's Wall: A Novel of Roman England*. HarperCollins, 2004.

Fradkin, Philip L. *Wildest Alaska: Journeys of Great Peril in Lituya Bay*. University of California, 2001.

Ridgeway, Rick. *The Big Open: On Foot Across Tibet's Chang Tang*. National Geographic, 2004.



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