

My Life in Heavy Metal

By Steve Almond

Grove Press

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

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In his smart and self-assured debut, *My Life in Heavy Metal*, Steve Almond breathes fresh life into the oft-explored territory of young love and longing. The 12 stories in this pulsating collection are populated with hookups, drunken kisses, failed passes, and souring relationships. And though it's an aggressively sexual affair ... at its core it's a collection with heart. His characters stumble unrehearsed through the choreography of modern love, wearing their sloppy passions on their rumpled sleeves, aching to connect.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

As readers take in a collection of short stories, they will inevitably consider whether there are connections among the stories, whether there is a continuity of character throughout, how the title comments on the collection, and – of course – which is their favorite among the tales in the volume. These are very good questions, but they do not necessarily lead to a coherent discussion.

The task of the discussion leader, then, is to guide readers into closer looks at some of the stories, using them as a springboard to the rest of the collection. A good place to start is often with the title story, which usually sets a tone for the entire volume and from which one can usually move to more comprehensive looks at a collection. For an hour-long discussion, one might choose two more stories to group with the title story so that overarching themes or varieties in technique or perspective can be explored. If the group then branches out with references to other of the stories, there will be a solid base on which to ground more general remarks.

In the case of Steve Almond's collection, the title story, "My Life in Heavy Metal," is a particularly good discussion opener, for it introduces a central character who, like many of the protagonists in the rest of the stories, looks back on the part he played in a failed relationship or -- in this case -- two failed relationships.

1. "My Life in Heavy Metal" plays out its drama against the backdrop of the heavy metal music circuit. How is heavy metal culture characterized in this story and how does it shape and, finally, comment on the narrator's relationships with Jo and Claudia?
2. The narrator/protagonist in "My Life in Heavy Metal" is looking back on a time when he was just out of college and beginning to make his way in the world. His counterparts in "Valentino" and "The Body in Extremis," are looking at earlier and later times in their respective lives. Can we look at these three stories to see how they treat important rites of passage in a coming of age story?
3. Four of the stories in *My Life in Heavy Metal* are much more impressionistic in their development: "The Law of Sugar," "The Pass," "Moscow," and "Pornography." How would you describe the effect of these stories on the reader?
4. Might "The Pass" have been another title story for this collection? Why? (Or why not?)
5. In "How to Love a Republican" the central relationship is set against a backdrop of the 2000 election. How do the characters comment upon the relative strengths of their political parties at this time? Was there a way in which their relationship might have withstood the external pressures on it? How or where might that possibility have existed?
6. "Geek Player, Love Slayer" is told from a woman's perspective. Discuss its effect on you and its relationship to the other stories in the collection.
7. The central character in many of these stories is somewhere other than home. How does travel or escape play out in stories such as "The Last Single Days of Don Viktor Potapenko" and "Run Away, My Pale Love"?
8. Though Steve Almond titles his collection *My Life in Heavy Metal*, one can't help but hear a singer from quite another genre of rock and roll in the background of this volume: U2's Bono declaring "I still haven't found what I am looking for." Do any of the characters in *My Life in Heavy Metal* know love? Is there hope for any of them to find what they are looking for? What do you imagine happens next in the story of your favorite character in the collection?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Steve Almond was born in Palo Alto, California and now lives in Somerville, Massachusetts. He teaches creative writing at Boston College. His books include *Candyfreak: A Journey Through the Chocolate Underbelly of America* (2004) and *My Life in Heavy Metal* (2002). He has written many short stories that have appeared in anthologies, magazines, and journals including; *Playboy*, *New England Review*, and *Mid-America Review*.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Steve Almond's website: www.stevenalmond.com

An [Interview](#) with Steve Almond



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