

Discussion Questions for Rick Bragg's
All Over But the Shoutin', Ava's Man, and The Prince of Frogtown

Discussion questions can help you appreciate books in new and deeper ways. Share these questions with your book group, or if you're not with a group, spend some time thinking about them yourself.

All Over But the Shoutin'

1. Why does Bragg begin his memoir with the image of redbirds fighting? Why do you think he includes the story of a bird attacking its own image in the mirror?
2. In the prologue, Bragg claims several times that “this is not an important book.” Does he convince us that in fact it is important? If so, how? Why does he feel that he “cannot take the chance of squandering the knowledge and the stories that [my mother] and my people hold inside them” [p. xvi]?
3. Bragg describes a memory of himself on a gunny sack that his mother is pulling through a cotton field as she works; at three, he “rides the back of the six-foot-long sack like a magic carpet” [p. 23]. How does this particular image sum up his mother’s love for him? Is his mother’s devotion to her sons’ welfare out of the ordinary?
4. Does Bragg regret his inability to forgive his dying father? Would reconciliation have alleviated Bragg’s need to compensate his mother for his father’s failures? What is the significance of the gift of books by an illiterate father to his clever son?
5. Although many aspects of his family’s life were ruled by poverty, Bragg was immersed in the traditions of the pinewoods, where self-reliant people were adept at music, building, and handcrafts, where “likker and religion flowed together” [p. 34]. Are certain elements of the life he describes enviable? Do you get the impression that his memories of childhood are colored by nostalgia? To what extent do you think nostalgia plays a role in the memories and experiences of everyone?
6. While many African-Americans—from Frederick Douglas to Maya Angelou—have given us their stories of growing up poor and black, the segment of society disparagingly called “poor white trash” has produced relatively few writers. Does this book change your view of the large segment of whites who live in rural poverty?
7. Although Bragg sees his background as a handicap in his profession, the unmistakably Southern way he uses the English language can be part of the appeal of his writing. One editor warned him about exploiting his gift to produce “too many pretty lines” [p. 228]. Do you agree that this is a danger for Bragg? What do you notice about his style, imagery, humor, and approach to news stories that is distinctive?

8. Did luck make the difference between Rick Bragg's life and the lives of his two brothers? Or do their different choices have more to do with temperament and character than with the hazards of fortune? Do you see Rick Bragg as a man who is more determined and driven than he admits? Why does he insist on attributing his success to luck?
9. Race relations, as Bragg shows, are complicated for poor whites in the South. What do you learn from the story of the black family down the road bringing food to Rick's mother? From his family's devotion to the demagogue George Wallace? From his work in Haiti?
10. Why is Bragg particularly drawn to stories about "living and dying and the trembling membrane in between" [p. 139]? Why is he so good at writing about violence and tragedy? What is it about journalism that most disturbs him?
11. Has Bragg's attempt to compensate for his mother's unhappy life contributed to his inability to settle down with someone? Is his avoidance of intimacy a legacy from his father or is it simply the syndrome of a successful and driven man who doesn't have time to attend to the emotional side of life?
12. Despite the revolution in American life that was brought about by the women's movement, the culture of the South is well known for its lingering devotion to ideals of chivalry. Does Rick Bragg raise his mother onto a pedestal? Does he risk turning her into a passive heroine who depends upon his help?
13. What, if any, are the definitive class barriers in our society? Does having been born poor mean that a person will always feel inferior to those who weren't? Do financial or professional achievements raise a person's "class" level?
14. With his urgent desire to make up his mother's losses, Bragg struggles between his impulse to "rewrite history so late in the volume of our lives" [p. 272] and the more realistic, if discouraging, realization that "you can't fix everything [p. 312]. Is he sacrificing himself for his mother? Or is what he does more for his own sake than hers?
15. Why does Bragg address one of the final chapters of his book to his father? How accurate is he in saying to his father, "I am just like you" [p. 318]? What has he learned in the process of writing this memoir? Why is his honesty so moving?

Ava's Man

1. In the prologue, Rick Bragg wonders about his grandfather, "What kind of man was this . . . who is so beloved, so missed, that the mere mention of his death would make [his family] cry forty-two years after he was preached into the sky?" [p. 9]

How does the book answer this question? What kind of man is Charlie Bundrum? Why does his memory evoke such powerful emotions in those who knew him?

2. Bragg says that he wrote this story “for a lot of reasons,” one of which was “to give one more glimpse into a vanishing culture” [p. 13]. How does he create a vivid picture of that culture? What does he admire about it? How is it different from “the new South”? What other reasons compelled Bragg to write about a grandfather he never knew?
3. Bragg says that Charlie Bundrum was “blessed with that beautiful, selective morality that we Southerners are famous for. Even as a boy, he thought people who steal were trash, real trash. . . . Yet he saw absolutely nothing wrong with downing a full pint of likker . . . before engaging in a fistfight that sometimes required hospitalization” [p. 53]. What kind of moral code does Charlie live by? Are his frequent acts of violence justifiable? In what sense can Charlie be called a hero?
4. Charlie is a man of great physical strength and courage, but what instances of kindness, generosity, and caring balance the violence and recklessness in his life? How does the inclusion of this kind of behavior in Bragg’s description create a richer and fuller portrait of the man?
5. In speaking of his grandfather’s legacy, Bragg says, “A man like Charlie Bundrum doesn’t leave much else, not title or property, not even letters in the attic. There’s just stories, all told second- and third-hand, as long as somebody remembers” [p. 18]. What is the value of preserving the kind of stories that Bragg gathers in *Ava’s Man*?
6. *Ava’s Man* is filled with dramatic confrontations and vivid scenes. What episodes stand out the most? What do these episodes reveal about the character of the Bundrum family?
7. In considering his grandfather’s drinking, Bragg writes, “I am not trying to excuse it. He did things that he shouldn’t have. I guess it takes someone who has outlived a mean drunk to appreciate a kind one” [p. 133]. What does this passage suggest about Bragg’s personal stake in reconnecting with his grandfather? What kind of portrait does he paint of his own father in *Ava’s Man*?
8. Charlie Bundrum “was a man who did the things more civilized men dream they could, who beat one man half to death for throwing a live snake at his son, who shot a large woman with a .410 shotgun when she tried to cut him with a butcher knife, who beat the hell out of two worrisome Georgia highway patrolmen and threw them headfirst out the front door of a beer joint called the Maple on the Hill” [p. 8]. In what ways is Charlie free from the constraints of society? What is the cost of this freedom? Is Bragg right in thinking that Charlie’s way of living is something that more civilized men envy?

9. Bragg writes that Ava could have had her sister Grace's life, a life of relative wealth and comfort, of fine clothes, good food, and travel, instead of a life of rented houses, poverty, and hard labor in the cotton fields. "She could have hated her life," Bragg admits [p. 153]. Why doesn't she? What does Charlie give her that other men cannot? What kind of woman is she?
10. Why does Charlie take in Hootie? What does this reveal about his character? What does Hootie bring out in Charlie?
11. Bragg writes that Charlie "could charm a bird off a wire" [p. 45]. What are the charms of Bragg's own storytelling style? Where else does he use colorful similes? In what ways is his narrative voice perfectly suited to his subject matter?
12. What does *Ava's Man* reveal about how the Great Depression affected people in the Deep South, especially those who lived in the foothills? How did it affect the Bundrums specifically? How are they treated by landlords, sheriffs, and others in positions of power?
13. For centuries, recorded history has largely been the account of those who have had the greatest impact on world events. Why is the history of a man like Charlie Bundrum important? In what ways does it offer a door into American history and culture that more conventional histories cannot provide?
14. In the epilogue, Bragg argues that when compared with the new South, Charlie Bundrum seems larger than life, because of "his complete lack of shame. He was not ashamed of his clothes, his speech, his life. He not only thrived, he gloried in it" [p. 248]. What accounts for Charlie's pride? Why is Bragg so proud of him? What does *Ava's Man* suggest about the way in which inner character is more important than external circumstances?

The Prince of Frogtown

1. How is *The Prince of Frogtown*, similar to Rick Bragg's other two books about his family? How is it different?
2. Why did Bragg's friend Willie Morris tell him, "You'll never find peace until you write about him (his father). There is no place you can go he will not be"?
3. Why did the mill advertise only for workers with families? What did the mill promise workers that signed on? ("good wages, good working conditions, good housing, electricity, free coal")
4. With all that the mill promised its workers, do you think this would be a good life? What sacrifices did the workers make to incur the "privileges" afforded mill workers?

5. Bragg mentions that his mother and paternal grandmothers married for love. How did this choice work out for them? Do you think that marrying for love is always the best reason to marry?
6. Why do you think Bragg alternated chapters about “the Boy” with chapters about his father?
7. What do you think caused Charles Bragg to turn into the man he became? Was it his natural inclination, his genetic heritage, his environment, his inability to better himself?
8. Why did Charles Bragg leave the Marines?
9. Do you think that life would have been different for Charles if his family had stayed on with him in Texas? Was Bragg’s mother wrong to have gone back to “her mama and her people” back in Alabama after traveling to Texas for a “new start”? After enduring her life with Charles previously, were you shocked she went to Texas in the first place?
10. What was your favorite anecdote about the younger Charles?
11. Has Bragg changed in any way since writing his first book? If so, in what way is he different as a person? As a writer?