

READING GUIDE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Our first introduction to Stephen Florida is his voice. Do you trust him and his self-awareness? How does Stephen's voice drive your experience of his story? Can you imagine the novel being narrated by someone else? What would change?
2. *Stephen Florida* inhabits a particular geography (small-town North Dakota), as well as an intensely realized physical space (the gym, the wrestling mat). How do those places shape the novel? What is their relationship to what's going on in Stephen's mind?
3. Stephen's experience is shaped by loss—his parents, his grandmother—and yet the novel offers opportunities for love in his friendship with Linus and romance with Mary Beth. In what ways is the novel motivated by isolation? Connection? How do those conditions evolve, and how do they change our narrator?
4. Mary Beth's obsession with Silas sets in motion much of the action in the last third of *Stephen Florida*—what relationship do you see between Stephen's pursuit of her and his pursuit of the truth about the professor?
5. Humor in fiction is often undervalued. While there's a lot about *Stephen Florida* that is lonely and brutal, it's also, in places, very funny. How do you experience those moments? What role do they play in the book?
6. What do *you* think the ending means?

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH GABE HABASH

1. Word on the street is that you've never wrestled! What drew you to write about wrestling, specifically college wrestling?

Wrestling is the most insular, intense, unforgiving, and demanding of sports, and I wanted to find out what type of person would be driven to commit to it. You can't be a good wrestler and not be committed to the point of obsession. A wrestler has a stronger character than the rest of us, but he'll also stick his fingers into his opponent's butt if it means an advantage during a match (this is called "checking the oil").

College sports are, for most student athletes, a dead end. So why would someone keep pushing, at the expense of things like relationships and free time, to achieve greatness in wrestling, especially when it's going to end and he'll never get those things back?

2. And how did you decide on North Dakota as the setting?

I've never wrestled, and I'd never been to North Dakota before. I've visited since completing an earlier draft, and I made a few minor changes to the story, but I need a blank slate when I write. I needed enough elements outside my own experience—wrestling, North Dakota—to be able to address from a different angle the emotional elements, like Stephen's depression, that are closer to home for me. I'm bad at writing about myself, though I have a number of things in common with Stephen.

I wanted a separate and harsh climate to amplify the solitude of Stephen's goal. The reader is watching something happen that no one else is paying attention to.

3. Stephen's voice propels the novel forward with an explosive energy, especially as he begins to unravel. What was the process for crafting such a complex, driven character?

Stephen is very organized and likes to situate his thinking in specific ways, but that increasingly slips away as he breaks down. So it became a

matter of poisoning his mental organization accordingly, and letting his subconscious and left-field thoughts take over, and allowing him to act on instinct more and more. Stephen is a very direct, active person—I think it can be boring when a narrator passively spends a lot of time with memories at the expense of a present narrative—so he is always thinking ahead or finding himself getting involved in difficult situations. Wrestling is the thing that keeps him in line because it occupies so much of his energy; it's when he can't wrestle that he needs to look for an outlet elsewhere. I wanted there to be the sense that he is eating up the world around him.

4. Who are some of your biggest literary influences?

Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* is a similar portrait of an obsessive, unhinged mind striving toward a strange perfection that only it really understands. Don DeLillo's *End Zone* is a good comparison for a book "about sports" that's not actually about sports. Funny picaresques like *The Sisters Brothers* and *Leaving the Atocha Station* were definitely influences. Dan Chaon does ominousness and dread better than anyone, and I tried to capture a similar tone. And Roberto Bolaño and Thomas McGuane are two of my favorite writers, so I'm sure they influenced the book. I also love any type of messy, weird, off-kilter writing: Valeria Luiselli, Joy Williams, Nell Zink, Lorrie Moore, Barry Hannah, Maggie Nelson, Richard Brautigan, Jane Bowles, Elizabeth McCracken, Jenny Offill, Percival Everett, and others.

5. Do you see any similarities between competitive wrestling and writing?

Both wrestling and writing consist of interminably long stretches of work with brief moments of satisfaction occasionally thrown in, but there's certainly more pain in wrestling.

RECOMMENDED READING FROM GABE HABASH

2666 by Roberto Bolaño

The Known World by Edward P. Jones

Pond by Claire-Louise Bennett

Who Will Run the Frog Hospital? by Lorrie Moore

Remainder by Tom McCarthy

Sea of Hooks by Lindsay Hill

The People in the Trees by Hanya Yanagihara

A Severed Head by Iris Murdoch

The Vegetarian by Han Kang

Percival Everett by *Virgil Russell* by Percival Everett