

Discussion Questions on *Remember Ben Clayton* by Stephen Harrigan

Questions on Theme

Characters of Gil and Lamar

1. Gil and Lamar make similar mistakes by being hard-headed with their children. But Lamar softens in the end when he allows his sister to visit the statue of Ben. Does Gil also change, and what passage in the book tells you that he does? How do you think he'll be different in the future?
2. Both Lamar and Gil are hard-headed men, and this hurts their relationship with their children. But are there any positives for these men for being so hard-headed?

Role of Artist & Critic

1. Gil or Maureen create their statues according to tradition and the classics. Is there any sense of either of them pushing boundaries? What's the process for creating great art, according to this book? How does the author make this process interesting? Since Gil and Maureen are the exemplars of great artists, do you agree with this book's portrayal of how great art should be made?
2. In what ways is the Texas art scene different, and perhaps better, for Gil than the New York art scene? Why are the two places so different for artists? In what ways might the New York scene be better for someone like Maureen?
3. What value is there in a statue placed outside of any accessible place?
4. Vance is an art critic sometimes. Is there any role in this world of this book for art criticism? Does Vance's failings of moral character say something about art critics or is that just serendipity? At the end of the book, Maureen feels like she could be friends with Vance. Did you find anything likable about him or what he does for a living?

Life during War

1. What are the similarities between Arthur's war, the riot Gil lives through, and Lamar's war while living as a Native American? How does violence continue to affect the characters, even after they have left behind the violence? Does the book offer any moral lessons on war or does it try to objective about it?
2. How does the gruesome scenes influence the reader when reading about daily life later in the book?

Story as Mystery Novel

1. Mystery novels often begin with an unexplained death that only gets solved at the end. This novel starts and ends with the mystery of why Ben became so distraught as to get himself killed in the war. How important is this mystery to the book? Did you read it as a mystery novel (i.e. continue to turn the page to solve the mystery), and if you didn't, what kind of novel would you classify it as?
2. Do you think Ben realized he was essentially committing suicide by being so reckless? Were you satisfied when you found out the reason for Ben dying?
3. Secrets and mysteries run throughout the storyline. How do secrets define the personality of characters like Gil and Lamar? Would they be different men without these secrets? How would this book be different without all the mysteries created by these secrets?

Woman as Artist

1. Maureen seems doomed to a life of spinsterhood. Do you think she'll should accept this life, or should she continue to try and find a husband? If she only had time for either a career as artist or life as wife and mother, which do you think she would choose?
2. Do you think Maureen will make it on her own in New York? Are there any hints in the book that help us on this? What is it about New York that makes her choose to live there?
3. There was no traditional love story in the novel. Did you expect one? Did you feel disappointed in Maureen having no romantic future at the end of the novel, and do you hold out hope for her in the future? Which would you rather have, Maureen as a happy mother and wife or Maureen as a successful artist?

Questions on Specific Quotes

from page 82-83

The nurses wore starched blue uniforms and the priests wore purple stoles and the wounded were brought in under red blankets. Red hot-water bottles were everywhere; in his delirium they seemed like sentinels, hanging from nails on the wooden posts and resting at the foot of every bed. Wounded men vomited black blood into white enamel basins.

1. Why does Arthur notice all of these colors? What might colors represent to a wounded or dying person?
2. Does almost dying make Arthur more aware of the world in the long run or was this just a short-term change? In what ways does death change Arthur without him realizing it?

from page 90

“The monument was hideous— a relief sculpture of a naked man with his hands on the hilt of a massive sword. The man was squat in stature, his hair cropped short, his expression a disdainful frown . Above the man’s head were the words “GOTT-MITT-UNS” and below the sword point “Gewidmet, 18. June. Div. 1915– 1916.” It struck Arthur as interesting that two years before the fight here the Germans had been so sure of their possession of this part of France they had buried their war dead in its soil and erected this scowling angel to watch over them.

“It’s ugly, is it not?” Jérôme said to him in French. He was lighting his massive pipe while sitting on the curving bench in front of the sculpture.

“I don’t like it,” Arthur agreed.

He tossed the fountain pen and the key and the photograph onto the pile of personal effects. The pile had grown during the day and there were perhaps a hundred items there now, nothing of any obvious consequence and certainly nothing of any value.

“To be a sculptor, to have that gift, and to produce something so wretched as this.”

Jérôme was shaking his head in theatrical disdain, waiting for Arthur to reply in the same spirit. But Arthur had stopped listening. He was looking at a small rectangle of metal that gleamed a little in the failing light and looked familiar. When he picked it up out of the pile he saw that it was what he had thought: a rectangle cut out of a mess-kit lid, with a crude relief carving of a horse standing on a Texas mesa.”

1. Everyone is an art critic. Jérôme doesn’t understand why someone would make art if it isn’t pleasant to look at. Why would someone make ugly art? Is there only room for beautiful art in this novel?
2. Is the mess-kit lid art? What makes something “art”?
3. How would Gil define good art? He jokes later in the book that his unfinished sculpture would count as modern art. How does modern art fail, then, according to Gil? What should you look for in a good sculpture?
4. How does the author describe the art in the book? Find specific passages and read them out loud. Can you mentally see it? In what ways can writers recreate art in words, and in what ways will words always fail at describing art?

from page 182

He'd hobbled the horse at the foot of the hill and walked up to the top with the dog and sat there for the rest of the night saying he was sorry out loud over and over again, his voice so monotonous and rhythmic that after a while he reminded himself of the Comanches singing their songs after a hunt or sometimes their dirges after a raid that had gone bad. It had been more like muttering than singing to him; he never did get used to it. But at times in his life he had taken a nostalgic comfort in those strange cadences, and maybe that's what he was trying to work up on the hill that night, calling out his dead boy's name and saying he was sorry as if the words were part of a chant that might have the power to undo what had been done.

1. In what ways does the short time spent as a Native American continue to affect Clayton as an old man? Why does he allow himself this indulgence when he's so careful to cut out anything else relating to that time period from his life?
2. What role does chanting and vocalization have in grief? How is this similar and how it is different from prayer?

from page 251-252

There was some other new dimension as well, something that must have resided in the piece all along. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that the sculptor was a woman. The subjects were not framed or pushed or defined, there was no statement made, no artistic agenda promoted. The artist had nothing to prove, no interest in testing herself against the expectations of the viewer. The piece was simply about what her eye had seen and what her hands had rendered.

1. Gil sees something new in Maureen's sculpture after it's finished. He seems to think that it came from her being a woman. Do you think he's right that it is Maureen's gender that made the piece what it was?
2. What about Maureen's character allowed her to add depth to the Clayton statue that her father couldn't? Do women create different art from men? Should we even try to see the differences?

These questions were created by Wendy Wilkinson with Houston Great Books for Gulf Coast Reads. Please visit



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