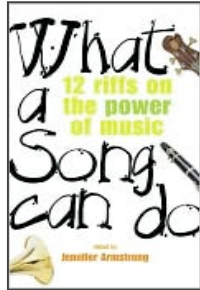


The Soundtrack of Our Lives



Summer Reading Discussion Group Book List: Summaries & Discussion Questions



Armstrong, Jennifer (Ed.). What a Song Can Do: 12 Riffs on the Power of Music. New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, 2004.

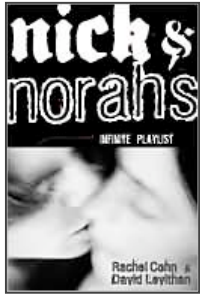
Summary:

This compelling collection of stories explores the powerful impact that music has in our lives—especially in the lives of teens. Each story strikes a new note: Ron Koertge introduces us to the boys in the band—the marching band; Joseph Bruchac contributes a Native American boy with no rhythm whatsoever;

Jennifer Armstrong writes about what was perhaps the first battle of the bands—during the American Civil War; and David Levithan offers up a love song that speaks powerfully to an unintended audience. But while each story is different, they combine into a harmonic song of praise—for the depths music can reach in us, and the power it has to bind us together.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which story did you like the most/least? Why?
2. In the first story “Variations on a Theme,” which band member did you identify with the most? Why?
 - a. Do you think the author did a good job describing the different kinds of people in high school? in a high school organization like band?
3. In what ways did “A Warrior Song” play and not play to Native American stereotypes?
4. In “A Warrior Song” why did Mitch finally—at the end of the story—remember and understand the songs he’d heard all of his life?
5. What did you think of the parents, especially the dad, in “Riffs”? Do you think he pushed his sons too hard? Do you know parents like this? Have you ever felt like this?
6. What did music mean to Nathan in “Riffs”?
7. What did music mean to the narrator in “What a Song Can Do”? Why did he write lyrics? Have you ever felt like him?
 - a. What does he realize about his mom at the end of the story?
 - b. Do you agree with the narrator when he says, “Our moments are music, and sometimes—just sometimes—we can catch them and put them into some lasting form”?
 - c. Did you like the poetic writing style of this piece?
8. Have you ever felt like Cameron in “The Audition” where you worked extremely hard for something? Did it work out for you? Did you foresee the ending? Why or why not?
9. Do you believe anyone can have synesthesia? Why or why not?
10. In “Ballad of a Prodigy” the narrator repeats the refrain “though music sings inside of me, / I wonder if your plans for me / are who and what I really am, / and who and what I’m meant to be.” Do you think child prodigies often feel this way? Why do parents push their children so hard?



Cohn, Rachel and David Levithan. Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf/Random House, 2006.

Summary:

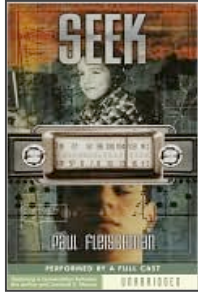
It all starts when Nick asks Norah to be his girlfriend for five minutes. He only needs five minutes to avoid his ex-girlfriend, who's just walked in to his band's show. With a new guy. And then, with one kiss, Nick and Norah are off on an adventure set against the backdrop of New York City--and smack in the middle of all the joy, anxiety, confusion, and excitement of a first date.

This he said/she said romance told by YA stars Rachel Cohn and David Levithan is a sexy, funny roller coaster of a story about one date over one very long night, with two teenagers, both recovering from broken hearts, who are just trying to figure out who they want to be--and where the next great band is playing. Told in alternating chapters, teeming with music references, humor, angst, and endearing side characters, this is a love story you'll wish were your very own.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why can't Nick and Norah get over their ex's?
 - a. What is your impression of Tris at the beginning? middle? end?
 - i. Do you think Tris is right when she says, "you needed to be hurt. You needed to have the truth kicked into you"? Was Nick too innocent?
 - b. How would you describe Tris & Norah's relationship?
2. What do you think about the way the authors describe Nick and Norah as pretty straightedge kids, especially compared to their friends? Are they realistic characters?
3. Is Norah "frigid"? Why would Caroline tell Norah that she is? Why would Tal? Why does Norah ponder her "coldness" throughout the book?
4. Why does Norah obsess—especially towards the end—about Nick's flaws and possible homosexuality? Why do people look for flaws in significant others?
5. What are your impressions of Norah's parents?
 - a. Do you think her dad did the right thing is tearing up Norah's Brown rejection letter & mailing an acceptance letter?
 - b. Do parents really know what's best for us—even if we don't think so?
 - c. What's the significance of Nick's jacket, aka "Salvatore"?
6. Dev says the Beatles song "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" is the best song in the world because it sums up what everyone wants. Norah disagrees. What do you think? What is the most brilliant / authentic song?
7. What do you think of the scene by the Pepsi machine? Do you think Nick and Nora would have gone all the way if they weren't interrupted?
 - a. Afterward, they both say they were glad they were interrupted and should take things more slowly. Do you agree?
8. The end of the book is somewhat ambiguous. What do you think will happen to Nick and Nora?
9. Do you think Nick and Norah would have gotten together if Norah didn't already know about Nick from Tris?
 - a. Why do you think they are attracted to each other?
 - b. How does music play a role in their relationship?





Fleischman, Paul. Seek. Chicago, Cricket Books/Marcato, 2003.

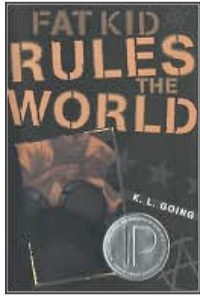
Summary:

Assigned to write his autobiography, high school senior Rob Radkovitz instead creates an oral portrait of his life, centering on the search for his missing father. Lenny G. abandoned Rob's mother when she was pregnant, leaving behind a tape of his last show as a DJ and a record of the sounds of his native Louisiana. Author Paul Fleischman uses Rob's memories: his crusty grandfather, his adoring aunts, his mother's Spanish soap operas, his grandmother's racy mysteries read aloud, and especially and repeatedly his father's lone tape to build a counterpoint of past and present, recorded and heard, that is an ever-unfolding, ever fascinating fugue. Determined to find his father, Rob acquires a series of increasingly sophisticated radios, searching obscure stations across the country for that missing voice. This powerful need to find the absent part of his life drives the story forward as Rob both imitates his father in becoming a radio personality and makes a final break in accepting the family he has.

Discussion Questions:

1. Why do you think Rob so badly wants to get in contact with his father?
 - a. In what ways does Rob attempt to connect with father? How does his search change over time?
2. Do you think Rob's mother was right to be brutally honest by telling Rob that his father didn't want him to be born?
3. Why do you think Rob's father suddenly decided to contact him?
 - a. Do you think Rob made the right decision in choosing not to have a relationship with his father? Why or why not?
 - b. Did you expect Rob to react this way?
 - c. How would you have responded?
4. What kind of relationship does Rob have with the family members who are present in his life—mom, grandparents, stepfather, Andy? How does his relationships with these family members change over time?
5. What did you think of the style of book? Did you find it confusing or realistic?
 - a. Why do you think the author chose to tell Rob's story in a collage of past and present voices?
6. In one of his radio programs, Rob's father says that music "brings back the old times and the old folks. Makes the wallpaper change right there on the wall to what you had when you were a baby"; his mother tells him that the song "Little Black Eyes" was playing when she and his father met. What music holds memories for you? If you were to create a soundtrack of your life, what music would you include? What memories do you associate with those songs?
7. Rob's English teacher, Mr. McCarthy, explains that the autobiography "should probe the themes in your life, signal events, and the influences of family, community, and your historical era on your development." What themes, events, and influences have shaped your life and in what ways? (What style would best suit your autobiography—traditional narrative, diary, play, song, rap, other?)





Going, K.L. **Fat Kid Rules the World.** New York: Penguin, 2003.

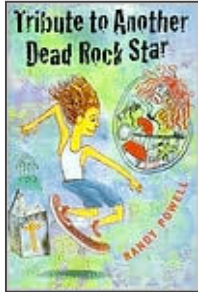
Summary:

Troy Billings is seventeen, 296 pounds, friendless, utterly miserable, and about to step off a New York subway platform in front of an oncoming train. Until he meets Curt MacCrae, an emaciated, semi-homeless, high school dropout guitar genius, the stuff of which Lower East Side punk rock legends are made. Never mind that Troy's dad thinks Curt's a drug addict and Troy's brother thinks Troy's the biggest (literally) loser in Manhattan. Soon, Curt's recruited Troy as his new drummer—even though Troy can't play the drums. Together, Curt and Troy will change the world of punk, and Troy's own life, forever.

Discussion Questions:

1. Which character do you identify with the most? Have you ever felt like Troy feels in the beginning of the novel?
2. Is coming into contact with Curt good for Troy, or is it bad, or did it not make any change at all?
 - a. Curt lies, steals, is manipulative and smelly. He also abandons Troy and gets him in trouble. Did you like Curt anyway? Why?
 - i. What was your first reaction to Curt? Did your feelings change throughout the book?
 - ii. Why do you think Curt was so popular with other kids?
 - b. Does Troy make the right decision to tell his father about Curt's prescription drug abuse?
3. What do you think happens after the book ends? Does Rage/Tectonic make it big? Does Curt stay clean?
 - a. What do you think about the ending of the book?
4. What did being in the band mean to Troy? What did performing mean to Troy and Curt?
5. What did you think of Troy's relationship with his father and brother?
 - a. Troy always tries to do what his dad tells him to do. Does this cause problems for Troy?
 - b. How does Troy's relationship with his family evolve?
6. Curt says that music "cuts through the bullshit of life." What do music and cutting through the bullshit have in common? Does all music do this or just certain music? Does some music create more bullshit? What about the music you listen to?





Powell, Randy. Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999.

Summary:

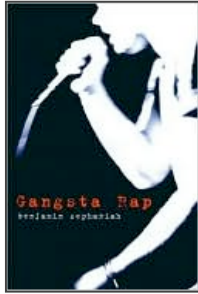
No longer able to live with his grandmother, fifteen-year-old Grady Grennan has to find a new address. One option is to move in with his mentally disabled half brother, Louie, in Seattle. But that poses a problem: Louie's adoptive mother, Vickie, and Grady are about as compatible as Mozart and heavy metal.

Nevertheless, Grady's testing the waters. He's in Seattle for a concert tribute to his and Louie's mother, a grunge-rock icon who died three years ago. Grady has been invited to speak at the tribute, but what is he supposed to say to thousands of adoring fans about a mother who abandoned her sons in favor of a musical career? Both humorous and deeply moving, *Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star* poses challenging, provocative questions to all sorts of readers -- cynics, liberals, slackers, and rock stars included.

Discussion Questions:

1. This book closely examines Grady's relationships with his family members—dead mother, grandmother, aunt Vickie, uncle Mitch, brother Louie. Which relationship did you find most interesting, loving, disturbing?
2. Why is Mindy—his mom's former agent—so important to Grady?
3. Some good things come to Grady as a result of having had a famous mom—other kids admire him; he gets to go to concerts and be on the radio. But bad things happen as a result of his mom's fame, too—other people know his family's private business, and people assume that he shares his mom's faults.
 - a. How does Grady handle his mom's fame and his life as a child of rock star?
 - b. What do you think it would be like to be the child of someone famous and controversial? What other positives and negatives can you imagine?
4. Grady is both very protective of his brother and also irritated by him. What are the challenges of having a brother like Louie? What are the responsibilities? What's the upside? How do you think you would manage having a brother like Louie?
5. What was your first impression of Vickie (his aunt)? Did your impression change over time?
6. Grady and Vickie both have strong feelings about the best way to deal with Louie? Which approach makes more sense to you? Why?
 - a. They clash especially hard over the idea of Louie going to the Tantrum concert? Do you think he should have been allowed to go? Why?
 - b. Vickie accuses Grady of using Louie to make trouble for her. Do you think he does—even if only unintentionally?
7. Grady has a lot of mixed emotions about his mother—love, hate, anger, pride, embarrassment, etc. Do you think these emotions stem from his mother's career as a rock star or from her personality? Do you think it would be easier or harder to sort out your emotions toward someone when that someone is dead?





Zephaniah, Benjamin. Gangsta Rap. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2004.

Summary:

Ray has trouble at home and trouble at school. It's the last straw for everyone when Ray and his friends Prem and Tyrone are permanently suspended. But they know what they want, more than most, perhaps. Their headmaster decides to give them a second chance, a chance to live their dream of forming a rap group. Through a specialized social program, the boys are taught the business of the music industry, what it takes to record an album, and how to lay down a track. Within weeks they have become the Positive Negatives, and within a few months they have signed a record deal and are on their way to the top. But their dream soon becomes a nightmare as violence escalates around them. Suddenly, not only their careers but also their very lives are at stake. The Positive Negatives are determined to prove that you don't need to be a gangster to be a great rapper.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are your first impressions of Ray?
 - a. Do you think Ray should have been expelled from his high school?
 - b. Did you support/understand Ray's decision to leave home after he is expelled from school?
2. What is Ray's and his friends' attitude toward girls? How do you feel about their attitude?
3. What are your thoughts/impressions of Marga Man?
4. The writer says, "Ray became captivated by [Yinka's] mind." Why do you think Ray felt like this?
 - a. How would you describe their relationship?
 - b. Ray likes Yinka a lot. Do you?
5. How would Ray & the Positive Negatives summarize "hip hop?" Do you agree with their motto?
6. All the way throughout the novel, Ray has said that he lives his life by the hip-hop philosophy. What does he do that contradicts his philosophy? Do you agree with his decision to buy the gun?
7. Were you surprised by the fact that the record company president set the two rap groups up against each other? Why or Why not?
 - a. Do you think this happens in real life?
8. What did you think of the author's writing style? Did you want more specific details, or were you ok with the brief summarizations of details?

Sources Used:

Summaries were taken from the publishers' synopses for each book.

