

LIFE ON THE LINE: Football, Rage and Redemption

Book Club Reader's Guide

1. Franklin and Bart are very aware of their differences. What are some of the differences that you noted between the two? For most of the book, the boys never speak of the ways they are similar. What do Bart and Franklin have in common?
2. The book is set in 1965. What would be different if the action had happened in the present day?
3. It's clear that most people in Laurinburg either know each other or know someone who knows the person in question. How does this inform the book? In what size town did you live when you were in eighth grade? How was your experience similar to – or different from – the experiences Franklin and Bart had?
4. Both Bart and Franklin would tell you their story was about football and conflict, but a great deal of the story also has religious overtones. How did the boys' different religious backgrounds inform the story? What do you make of the conversion Bart's grandfather experienced at the tent meeting? How did the presentation of religious themes compare to your own experience?
5. If football is about conflict, religion – at its best – is about reconciliation and healing. Did the religious themes in this book point toward reconciliation and healing? Why did you answer as you did?
6. Football is more than a contact sport; it is a collision sport. If you never played football, were you surprised by the violence of the game? What was your response to some of the more-underhanded tactics (hitting opponents in the groin, stomping feet with cleats, setting an opponent up to get penalized, drawing an opponent offside) the players used?

If you did play football, did the scenes involving the game ring true? Why did you answer as you did?

7. There is a story about a veteran football player who – in an interview – remarked: "Some people play football like it is a game. I never was one of those. I played the game like it was a referendum on my right to exist. It was societally sanctioned rage, and it saved my life." Do you think this statement applies to Franklin? How about Bart? Why did you answer as you did?
8. As we move through the narrative, it is clear that Bart and Franklin are both thinking about what it means to be a man. In Chapter Two, the narrator tells us: *Bart stiffened his back, pulled himself up to his full height, and stood ramrod straight like a Marine.* In Chapter Thirty, the narrator describes Franklin walking by the reception desk at the hospital: *He stood up straight, sucked in his stomach, and acted like a man who knew exactly where he was going.*

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It is easy to laugh at these caricatures, but they raise an important question. What behaviors are authentically male? Are there any behaviors that are uniquely male? How, if at all, are authentic male behaviors different from authentic female behaviors?

9. When Doris Wagram goes for counseling with Robert Inman (Chapter Seventeen) she remarks: "A woman cannot teach a boy to be a man." Franklin's father says the same thing after he and Franklin's mom meet with the school principal (Chapter Twenty-nine). What point do you think these characters are making with this statement? Do you agree?
10. Reflect on the book's ending. How do you think – after twenty-plus chapters of laying waste to each other – Franklin and Bart were able to reach a rapprochement so quickly? What things do the boys have in common at the end of the book that they did not share at the beginning?