



Geography Club

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Synopsis

Russel Middlebrook is convinced he's the only gay kid at Robert L. Goodkind High School. Then his online gay-chat buddy turns out to be none other than Kevin, the popular but closeted star of the school's baseball team. Soon Russel meets other gay students too. There's his best friend, Min, who reveals she's bisexual; Min's soccer-playing girlfriend, Terese; and Terese's politically active friend, Ike.

But how can kids this diverse get together without drawing attention to themselves? "We just choose a club that's so boring nobody in their right mind would ever in a million years join it. We could call in the Geography Club!"

Geography Club is for anyone, gay or straight, who's ever felt like an outsider — a fast-paced and funny tale of teenagers who may not learn any actual geography in their latest club, but who discover plenty about the treacherous social terrain of high school, and the even more dangerous landscape of the human heart.

Major Themes and Ideas

1. Bullying can come in many forms, and can even exist between friends.
2. Superficial differences sometimes mask underlying similarities; people are not always what they appear.
3. Forgiveness is an essential part of friendship.
4. Being a fully mature, ethical person sometimes means putting the concerns of other people ahead of oneself.

Discussion Questions

1. At the beginning of the book, Russel feels different from everyone else in his school. Is he really that different? Is what ways is he the same? Some critics have called Russel an "everybody" and a "universal character"? How can a character who feels "different" also be called "universal"?
2. *The Geography Club* never discusses actual geography, but the members do learn about a geography of sorts. What do they learn? Why does Russel compare the locker room to a battle zone, and why does he think of the school's various cliques and social groups as "countries"? Is that an accurate description of a high school campus?
3. Adults almost never appear in the book. Why do you think the author chose to do this? In what areas are adults an important part of your life? In what areas are adults not an important part?
4. In the book, bullying takes many forms. Give examples. Can a friend bully a friend? What about sexual partners? What is bullying anyway? Is a person who claims he or she is being harassed always right?
5. When Russel is trying to decide whether to forgive Gunnar, he remembers how Min had forgiven him, and he thinks, "It was funny how everything was fitting together like this." In what ways do the different characters in the book reverse roles? Was Min right to forgive Russel? Was Russel right to forgive Gunnar? Kevin?
6. Through the course of the book, Russel experiences life as a not-so-popular kid (in the "Borderlands of Respectability"); an extremely popular kid ("the Land of the Popular"); and a total loser ("Outcast Island"). Why do you think the author had Russel see life from all those points-of-view? Have you ever experienced a shift in popularity?
7. In the end, Russel and Min decide to break up with Kevin and Terese. Did they both make the right choice? Could their relationships have worked out if they'd stayed together? How were the two relationships the same? How were they different? Is Kevin a bad person? Is Terese a bad person?
8. Several times in the book, Russel compares Brian Bund to Jesus Christ. What point is he trying to make? What role does Brian play in the book, and in the school?
9. These days, some high schools are very accepting of openly gay students, other less so. What was/is your high school like in this respect? If a school is accepting of gay students, does that make the book less relevant?

Suggested Class Projects

1. Have students make a map or globe of the "countries" (i.e. cliques) at their own school. Which "countries" are the largest, and why? If they were real countries, which would be the largest? The most powerful?
2. Hold a "United Nations" meeting, where the different "countries" (i.e. cliques) at your school have a session. Have the "ambassadors" to the countries list their major grievances, and have other "ambassadors" respond. End with a discussion of the ways in which the "countries" share common ground. (For an interesting twist, require all students to represent a clique other than the one they're actually in.)
3. Have the class brainstorm to come up with all the words that people use to harass or bully other people. Use a poster or blackboard to list them all. Talk about the ways in which a person might feel being called these names. Encourage students to be creative in words that could be used to bully.