



Grab On to Me Tightly as if I Knew the Way

By Bryan Charles
ISBN: 9780060882983

Introduction

"The first song is 'Built Myself But I Exploded.' The bass and drums throb into my shins. The power light on the Twin Reverb glows like god's electric blood. The way my hand doesn't know anything with all those faces staring back at me and then it all of a sudden does. My ears ring and my bones shatter and sweat drips into my eyes."

Vim Sweeney just graduated from high school, just quit his job as a dishwasher, and just fell totally in love with his bandmate's girlfriend. The year is 1992, and with a recession and the first Gulf War underway, the future looks bleak for a new generation. For Vim, music gives voice to his inchoate rage...at least until a summer of painful realizations helps him bridge the awkward gulf between boy and man. Fresh, funny and entirely original, Bryan Charles' debut novel is a welcome addition to the great tradition of coming-of-age literature.

Questions for Discussion

1. "When you grow up you can be anything, they said, but that's a lie too." How does this opening sentence set the tone of the novel? Do the working lives of any of the adults in *Grab on to Me Tightly* give Vim any hope for what happens when you grow up?
2. At Gruber Dills' party, Vim thinks, "It can't all be dreams. It can't all be death to this word but yearning." What is the "it" he refers to? Does he find an answer while in the bathroom?
3. When Trudy asks why he disappeared after sex, Vim replies, "Isn't that what men do?" How does his answer highlight the difficulties of navigating towards adulthood?
4. What role does music play in the lives of each character? When Uncle Bro says, "music saved me," do you think Vim agrees? Is Vim articulating a rage against the dominating baby boomer culture as "a great scream bloomed inside me" whenever his mother played Leonard Cohen?
5. Quite a few sections free-associate the way one would flip through TV channels, or involve characters trading the slogans or jingles from commercials back and forth. Does the barrage of brand names, bumper stickers, and snack cake options expose the cultural vacuum surrounding Vim, or do these items form a significance of their own?
6. The bands and labels name-checked in this novel—Soundgarden, Nirvana, SubPop—are touchstones of early 90s grunge. How did the music reflect America's social, cultural, and political landscape? Did its rather nihilistic ethos represent a generation born too late to think of sex without AIDS?
7. While talking to Wheeler, Vim realizes that "Jake's parents might be the only ones I know who are still together and doing okay." Could you answer his question: "How can so many people fall out of love?" How has each kid reacted to the aftermath of divorce?
8. What does Vim ultimately realize about his stepfather Ed that allows him to finally understand his complex feelings toward his real father? Does Joe Sweeney strike you as an insincere phony or a man with genuine regrets?
9. Does kissing Helene trigger changes in Vim's life? Why or why not? Do you think love can ever be as intense as it is to a teenager, "like this, bursting open, feeling every second with an atom-smashing heart?"
10. *Grab On To Me* is narrated entirely from Vim's point of view. How would the story change if Wheeler or Helene were to narrate? What would remain the same?