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Reflections: A Student Response Journal



Ordinary People
Judith Guest



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To The Student

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.

Ordinary People

All references are taken from the Penguin edition of *Ordinary People*. Published by the Penguin Group. New York. Copyright 1976, Judith Guest.

Note to Teacher: This novel contains strong language and descriptions of teenage suicide attempts, teenage sexual activity, and underage drinking.

Pre-Reading

1. Read several times the poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay that appears before the title page, "Sonnet CLXXI." Rewrite the poem in your own words. Then, write a few sentences predicting what the novel will be about based on the content of Millay's poem.

Chapter 1

2. The first chapter opens with the assertion that "to have a reason to get up in the morning, it is necessary to possess a guiding principle." Bumper stickers, it suggests, are one way people express the things that are important to them.

Respond to one of the following prompts:

- A. Write a paragraph describing the most memorable bumper sticker you have seen, and explain why it made an impression on you.
- B. Do you agree that bumper stickers reveal things that are important to the people who display them? Write a paragraph explaining your perspective. If possible, use an example to support your thoughts.
- C. Do some light internet research on bumper stickers. Choose two or three ideas that reflect your "guiding principle(s)" or things that are important to you. Record them, and write a few sentences for each about how it relates to something that is important to you.

Ordinary People

6. “Growing up is serious business. He, Cal, would not be young again, not for anything. And not without sponsors: a mother and father, good fortune, God.” Reflect on the process of growing up, and choose one of the following to write about:
- A. If you could go back and relive any year or period of your life, what would it be? Write a paragraph about that time and why you would choose it.
 - B. Do you think that Cal’s perspective is typical for a middle-aged adult? Take a poll of several middle-aged adults that you know, asking them whether they would like to be young again and why or why not. Then, write a paragraph comparing or contrasting your findings to Cal’s perspective. Explain why you think these adults feel as they do.
 - C. Cal lists four things that he would not want to be without if he had to go back and grow up again: a mother, a father, good fortune, and God. Write your own list. What are the three to five most important things you would want if you had to go back and grow up again? Write a few sentences to explain why you chose each one.

Chapter 3

7. “The air is crisp and cool, and he rubs his hands together, shivering in the thin denim jacket. He should go back inside; get a heavier one, but he doesn’t want to risk it. Not that she will care, or say anything. But the hurdle has been jumped once today. Enough.”

Write a paragraph explaining your understanding of the vague references in this opening paragraph of the chapter. Be sure to answer the following questions: What does Conrad not want to “risk”? Who is “she”? What is the “hurdle” he refers to? Why is once “enough”?

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11. In the next-to-last paragraph of this chapter, the author uses italics to indicate Conrad's conversation with himself.

Write a screenplay for the movie version of this scene. How will you show Conrad's discussion with himself? Consider the following:

- Will there be more than one actor?
- Will Conrad be speaking aloud or only in his mind?

Write your screenplay in script form with speaker(s) designated and specific line delivery and stage directions. Try to make the scene as vivid and realistic as possible. You may use the following beginning or write your own:

- [Walking down the street, hands in his pockets, staring off into space ahead of him]
- (Conrad thinking to himself); audience hears his voice but he is **not physically speaking**: So, how do you stay open, when nobody mentions anything, when everybody is careful *not* to mention it?...

Chapter 6

12. Calvin inwardly expresses disgust at the superficiality of his secretary Cherry. Even though she is young and immature, she seems to know who she is and has the confidence to act accordingly. He also sees his former mentor, Arnold Bacon, as an example of a person who knew exactly who he was. Calvin feels the weight of his lack of self-knowledge. He knows *what* he is (a tax attorney) and *how* to be what he is, which he knows by rote, but he doesn't know *who* he is; he doesn't have a grasp of his true, inner self. The question plagues him, and he finds it too complicated to answer.

Write a poem describing yourself and how you perceive yourself. Do you feel that you know your true self, or are you uncertain? Convey how your perception of yourself influences your actions. Your poem must be at least ten lines long. It does not need to rhyme, but it certainly may.

Ordinary People

22. Several people have questioned Conrad's busyness so soon after the hospitalization, calling it too much, too soon. When Conrad quits the swim team, however, Salan voices the opposite perspective. He suggests that Conrad is making a grave mistake, that he's "messing up" his life again. Dr. Berger, however, thinks that Conrad should do what he wants to do.

Imagine that you are Conrad's school counselor. Coach Salan has just notified you about Conrad's decision, and you feel the need to write a letter to Conrad's parents expressing your feelings on the issue. Write a detailed paragraph in which you clearly state your opinion on Conrad's decision to quit the swim team. Give specific, detailed reasons why you feel as you do. Use a letter format such as the following:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Jarrett,

I have just heard of Conrad's decision to quit the swim team. Coach Salan called me. As you probably know by now, he believes Conrad is making a big mistake. Personally, I feel...

23. As Conrad reflects on his decision to quit the swim team, he thinks, "There is no problem improving your timing, or perfecting a stroke, if the desire is there, but you cannot fire up, cannot manufacture desire, when there is no spark at all to build on. This was not a mistake, what happened today. It is not to be looked at as a failure." What is your perspective on quitting and failure? Is the decision to quit something before it is completed always a failure? Have you ever quit something midstream? Do you think that you failed at it or became a failure because you quit?

Imagine that you are a parenting expert who writes an advice column for a popular parenting magazine. Choose one of the following titles and write a persuasive article for your readers about how to guide their children through the activities they participate in: **It's Never Ok to Quit** or **Sometimes, the Right Thing to Do is Quit**. Be sure to include specific reasons to support your opinion and examples to illustrate your points, if possible.