

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

Straight Man by Richard Russo

- How does the prologue set the stage for the rest of the life of William Henry Devereaux, Jr.?
- How does Hank express love?
- Why does Hank have persistent fantasies of seeing Lily with other men? Why does he fantasize about other women (Meg, Rachel, etc.)? Do these fantasies represent his fears or his desires?
- What are some of the many symptoms of distress and instability Hank shows in the first half of the book?
- Why has Julie chosen to build a replica of her parents' house? What does this say about Julie? And her relationship to her father?
- Hank dreads his colleagues moving to Allegheny Wells and becoming his neighbors. Are his co-workers (Jacob, Finny, Marie, etc.) really his friends? And why is Hank isolating himself?
- "Anger . . . is an emotion that's foreign to me," says Hank (p. 52). Is that true? What emotions does he express throughout the book? Why does he have a problem with expressing his emotions?
- Why does Hank make his surprising career decision at the end of the novel? What are the motives behind this decision?
- What is the significance of William of Occam and his Occam's Razor theory and how does it pertain to Hank's life?
- "In English departments the most serious competition is for the role of straight man" (p. 106). What does Hank mean by this? How is Hank a "Straight Man?"
- Why does Hank bring up the death of William Cherry, the man who lay down on the town's railroad tracks? Why does Hank feel exhilaration rather than fear when he suspects he may have prostate cancer?
- Why has Hank not written another novel since his first one? Is there any indication that he will write one in the future?
- What, if anything, has Hank's mother given up to be a wife and mother? Is there any chance for her and Hank to become close to one another? What does the future hold for her?
- West Central Pennsylvania University is clearly a mediocre institution. "We have believed...that we were made for better things" (p. 132). Does this belief diminish Hank, or does it strengthen him?



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