

Reading Group Guide

1. What are some of the key characteristics of a coming-of-age story, and where do you see these represented in *The Martin Chronicles*? How do you think the novel's beginning and conclusion relate to Marty's journey?
2. "There's no 'base' in real life, Marty. There's no 'time-out.'" What are some rules that Marty and his friends have that disappear as they grow up? Do they gain any new rules in the process?
3. Turning thirteen is often viewed as a significant milestone of becoming an adult, which is reflected in the tradition of bar mitzvahs like Max's. How else do you see the transition to adulthood marked in *The Martin Chronicles*?
4. How do Marty's relationships with Max and Dave develop as they grow older?
5. Consider Marty's relationships with the adults in his life. How do those relationships vary, and how do they evolve as Marty matures?
6. A line is drawn in the sand while Marty is at camp and is made to choose between Carter and his new friends. At what other points in the book is a line drawn in the sand, where a choice needs to be made? How do the stakes get higher as he gets older?
7. When Marty goes to the beach with Evie, he observes, "I stood knee-deep, the dumbest place to be, neither in all the way nor out." How else is Marty trapped between places throughout the book, and is he eventually able to move on?
8. *The Martin Chronicles* opens with the line, "Girls invaded our school two months into sixth grade." Girls "invade" in different ways throughout the book, from Evie to Max's girlfriend Annie. How does Marty's reaction to these intrusions change?
9. At one point during his friendship with Rob, Marty says, "I knew there were things I didn't get." In what ways is Marty's perspective limited, and how does this affect your reading of the book?
10. Marty remembers that when he and Evie built sandcastles together, "All Evie cared about was building the wall. She didn't care about the castle," and asks, "What kind of person cares more about the wall than the castle?" How do you think this observation characterizes Evie?
11. Marty comments on the games in children's magazines featuring "pictures zoomed in so close you couldn't tell what you were looking at. They were impossible to figure out—how could you know what the skin of a grasshopper actually looked like?—and yet there was always this thrilling sense of amazement when you saw the full image and couldn't believe you didn't recognize it for what it was." Are there other elements of Marty's life—or the novel itself—that are too "zoomed in" to be easily understood or immediately recognized?

12. What do you think is the significance of Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, which Marty repeatedly struggles to read beyond the first page?
13. How did the 1980s setting affect your reading of the book? Do you think this story would have evoked the same emotions in you as a reader if it had been set in a different time period?
14. What feelings of nostalgia does *The Martin Chronicles* bring about for you when reading it? What events do you recall from your own childhood and adolescence that now seem relevant to you shaping the adult you became?

A Conversation with John Fried

What first inspired you to write *The Martin Chronicles*?

After I completed my MFA, I had a really hard time writing for a while. There were too many rules and too much advice floating around my head from teachers and mentors and fellow students. I was fixated on developing my “authentic voice” and sounding literary, but everything I did was forced and, well, terrible. Often, I couldn’t get anything on the page. So I just decided to block out all the voices and focus on the kinds of stories I liked to read, which were slightly more plot-driven stories with a mix of humor and pathos. And somehow that led me to Marty. The first piece of it was the chapter called “Birthday Season.” After that, I wrote a lot of different kinds of stories about other characters, but I just kept coming back to Marty. I started to see a shape and an arc revealing itself in the different pieces of his story, and I recognized that there was a book here about Marty’s transformation from adolescent boy to a young man. I didn’t write the book chronologically, but much of the second half of the book emerged later in the process. And I was evolving and growing as a writer as worked on it. Although the last few chapters weren’t necessarily easier to write, at least I felt a tiny bit more confident as a writer when I wrote them—like 50 percent sure the book was going to become something, instead of 20 percent. And that was unexpected and completely exciting.

Did your own experience of growing up in New York City affect how you wrote Marty’s character or developed the plot?

Absolutely. New York City is a world I know very well. And it’s certainly one that I drew on in constructing the setting that Marty inhabits. That said, I’m not Marty and there’s no one person I knew growing up that exactly matches a particular character in the novel. I’ve borrowed from different people, from myself, and fabricated a whole lot simply in the interest of telling a good story. My hope is that while New York City figures largely in the plot and Marty’s life, the reader doesn’t have to know that environment to appreciate what he goes through. Marty is just a kid, trying to navigate the world as best he can, and that’s true no matter where you’re from.

Did writing from Marty’s perspective as a boy and then teenager present any challenges for you?

I think writing from the perspective of a young narrator – particularly in the first person point of view — is hard. You have to be aware of little things, like syntax or phrasing in how he speaks and even thinks. At the same time, there’s this question of narrative stance. The book is told primarily in the past tense, but the question is, how far is Marty from the actions he’s describing? I’ve always thought it’s not that far. He’s got a little distance, which allows him to reflect on what’s happened and offer as much insight as he is capable of offering given his age, but it’s not like he’s an old man with a lifetime’s worth of wisdom, looking back on his childhood. Being conscious of that part of his voice was something I had to consider the whole time I drafted and particularly when I revised the book.

Much of this book feels like a timeless coming-of-age story, but it is nevertheless infused with a strong sense of time and place. Why did you choose 1980's New York for the setting? Did you ever consider having Marty grow up somewhere else?

There was something really great about being a kid in New York City at this time, because you had so much independence. There were no cell phones tethering us to our parents and friends, no Internet to occupy our time. There were other distractions, no doubt, but it was simply quieter. That's my memory of it. That freedom and solitude was definitely exhilarating, but it could also be scary. That's something I try to show in *Marty*: how's he often left alone to make sense of the world. As far as setting it somewhere else, I tried, but it just seemed like I was avoiding the obvious about *Marty*. He's a New Yorker. All my images of him involved the terrain of New York – walking the streets, in the park, in the subway – and I just decided to trust my instincts on it. That part of the story comes straight from me.

In “The Castle or the Wall,” Marty says, “I started to wonder if that’s what death did—it locked a person in time for you, as if they only existed in small windows of memory.” Was this idea of preserving memory present elsewhere in the book or in your wish to write it?

As the structure of the book became clear to me – that it was going to be episodic in nature – I think I just bought into the idea that you could paint a picture of someone's whole adolescence by showing these different key moments. Several people very close to me – family and friends – had passed away right around the time I was finishing up that particular chapter, so I think that idea was fresh in my mind. I had given a few eulogies at funerals and listened to many other people talk about death and life, and I noticed how everyone picked these moments to zoom in on as a way of letting us know who that person was and their relationship to them. Then again, I could also say that I stole that idea from Virginia Woolf and her whole idea of “moments of being,” which has stuck with me since reading about it in college.

What are some of your favorite coming-of-age stories?

This is such a hard question. When I was young, I read everything by authors like Judy Blume and Paul Zindel. I remember reading *Catcher in the Rye* and *A Separate Peace* and *The Outsiders* in school and being in awe that you could create a story about someone that age. And then there are the “coming-of-age” books I've read as an adult like Stephen Chbosky's *Perks of Being a Wallflower* or Tom Perrotta's *Bad Haircut* or Susan Minot's *Monkeys* that became almost models for *Marty*'s story once I understood what I was trying to do. When I teach fiction writing, I discuss a lot of coming-of-age stories, whether it's Charles Baxter's “Gryphon” or Julie Orringer's “Pilgrims” or ZZ Packer's “Brownies,” partly because I really like them, but also because I think they are such good models for new writers. These transitional moments in life make rich material for stories. But I often struggle with the expression “coming-of-age story” in general because it seems to reduce the writing to such a simplistic idea. It almost sounds cute, like a little kitten you pick up and play with for a few minutes. This is going to sound like a total cop out, but I've always wondered if most stories couldn't be considered some kind of coming-of-age of story. Obviously not every story is about someone young becoming an adult, but most stories center their conflict on a character struggling with the transformation from one state to a next (or their failure to do so).

Why did you choose to structure the narrative in an episodic format? Were certain episodes easier to write than others, and did any chapters not make the final cut?

Once I had two or three chapters of the book from different points in Marty's life, I started to see the arc of a narrative emerging, which centered on his growth from age eleven to seventeen. I started to believe I could tell his whole story that way. So in a lot of ways, I didn't necessarily choose it as much as the structure revealed itself to me. But yes, some episodes were definitely much easier to write. I didn't write the book chronologically, but much of the second half of the book emerged later in the process. And I was evolving and growing as a writer as I worked on it. So the last few chapters weren't necessarily easier to write, but at least I felt a tiny bit more confident as a writer when I wrote them—like 50 percent sure the book was going to become something, instead of 20 percent. There were no full chapters that didn't make the cut, only a few scenes that, in revision, were unnecessary or bad or insane or simply didn't move the story forward. But that's pretty much true with any writer I know.

Marty has so many firsts and lasts, as well as beginnings and endings. Were there any moments like these in his life that you particularly wanted to focus on?

I never started a chapter thinking, oh, this is going to be the one about Marty's first love, or this is going to be the chapter about race or sexuality. I always started with an image or scene or idea in my mind and let it see where it would go for me. The image of Marty driving the elevator as a young kid. The idea of Marty talking to his grandmother when she believes she sees her dead husband. The scene of Marty trying on the girl's stolen retainer. (That scene, in particular, had been around for a long time attached to no story or character, just this idea of the perverse things kids do that are vastly more complicated than they appear to be. I remembered reading it in a workshop once. Some people loved it. Others looked as if they were terrified of me.) All the scenes were the triggers that got me going deeper into a particular moment of his life, but I never knew exactly what they would become. If I had gone into a story trying to write about a specific touchstone moment, I think it wouldn't have worked at all. It had – and still has -- to be organic on some level. No matter what I write I always feel a sense of reassurance when the characters take over and surprise me. When the story, in other words, becomes something different than what I imagined.

When did the idea to incorporate Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* and name your novel *The Martin Chronicles* occur to you?

I love science fiction and I read a lot of it growing up. Bradbury's book, along with Asimov's *I, Robot*, and a few other sci-fi classics were incredibly important to me. Marty, on the other hand, isn't much of a reader. Anything he was going to read was going to be done begrudgingly—forced upon him by his mother or school. I don't know if my love of Bradbury's book played subconsciously on me, but once I saw the connection between his name and the book, it was as if I'd been given a gift.