

Greyhound: A Reading and Study Guide.

Dear readers, educators, students, book club participants,

Below is a compiled list of questions that I have been asked over time. I brought them together for the enjoyment and continued educations of my more curious readers. I have done my best to be both honest about this material and also forthcoming; hoping to shed light on a few things that might not be clear to the casual reader. We often get caught unawares by much material these days as markets and advertising often tells what is good and what is not and more and more, people are left out of that process of culling and sifting.

Reading is an exercise of discovery as much as it is a break from the everyday as some would assert – and they do.

All the best ... hope you enjoy the reading ...

Steffan

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1. What is Greyhound about?

Greyhound is the story of an eleven year old boy named Sebastien Ranes who is abandoned by his mother as the book opens and we find her dropping him off in the Stockton Greyhound bus station to travel across country, unaccompanied, to go live with his Grandmother in Altoona, Pennsylvania over 2500 miles away.

I've been working on *Greyhound*, both in my head and on paper, for about twenty-five years. I have boxes of journals in my garage detailing many of the stories that are in the book, thoughts I had back then when I was travelling back and forth by bus, and other small details that made the book have a strong sense of authenticity. I guess I would be considered what some call a diarist. I don't write events down everyday and then time-stamp them, but I do have a tendency to keep plugging away data into tiny books that sometimes resemble stream of consciousness and sometimes have a concise crumb trail.

Most of the experiences that are in the book are events that actually happened and have taken place in my life, writing about them within the confines of three hundred pages isn't so easy, but I felt compelled to write about those days. Those years were a very difficult time for me, and pulling a lot of those feelings forward again brought out a lot of feelings that I had buried. A few of the themes I covered like stuttering have a more elusive and artful interpretation, while the theme of smoking, or my displeasure of people who smoke, has a more direct and obvious message.

Several of the characters in the book are modeled after personal experiences and many of the conversations that are had, especially those regarding Daryl Hall are conversations that I'd both heard and had myself as a child. Writing about much of this was an incredibly rewarding and therapeutic experience for me. I'm very satisfied at the result of *Greyhound* and thankful for everyone that helped bring it forward since the first moment it was birthed into its first-draft form.

2. Was the Marcus Franklin character a real person?

Marcus was a real person that I met on the bus. I've thought quite a bit about my experience with him and the conversations that we had into the middle of the night. When you're young, it's the simplest and kindest of gestures that have the most effect and create the most lasting of memories. A bag of pretzels can be the equivalent of much more over the passage of time. Not having good role models growing up, or any rather, I often found myself reaching outward for a guide or role models from external sources. Those are often the most dangerous because they have a limit as to what they can give back to you. Those limits are not always visible, especially when you're young. Not having a father, I spent the majority of my adult life searching for a suitable alternate, and never succeeding, it shaped me from the character you read about in *Greyhound* who feels like he's turning into a mannequin to the adult who actually became Pinocchio later on.

In coming up with the last name for Marcus, because I had no idea of what his real last name was, I landed on Franklin because it was the middle name of one of my favourite actors, Avery Brooks. It's actually his middle name. e often take things like a genuine father figure too much for granted or even fail to recognize them at all.

3. Why did you set the book in 1981?

I set the book in 1981 because it was a period where life was very different than it is today and in more ways than can be imagined in books or through culture. It was also the period when I traveled the most by Greyhound bus. Some people may not remember it that well, or not have lived through it but many have. The most important facet of that time was that it was the beginning of the modern world as we now know it. The world was in a cataclysmic upheaval in the early eighties and it truly was the dawning of the culture that has shaped the last thirty years from music, film, clothes, literature and even speech. Most of our transmutable information that we share had its birth during this period.

It's hard to say if it's finally waning, as people have a tendency to hold on tightly to the past and love again all things retro. But the eighties was an era of 'analog communication' versus what we have today, which is digital. From telephones to records, everything was analog then and it had an effect on everything it touched. People were forced to make more direct links with each other, reach out, touch and feel the world around them. There was a need to verify the space in front of them. Today's world seems to ask us repeatedly to do the opposite and not verify our world at all, but mainly because our world-view has become much more fragile and our personal stake in life fraught with intense peril. 1981 was surely a pivotal time in American history and will probably be regarded as such the further we move from it.

In reading *Greyhound*, you may feel and recognize direct similarities with current time, but that's because the problems people face are the same and timeless. Finding compassion and friendship and dealing with intense personal isolation is something that we're far from understanding and dealing with even on a personal basis.

4. Hall & Oates figure into the story as well, almost like a backstory. Did they have an influence on you growing up?

I believe 1981 was the zenith of that era for a lot reasons. Hall & Oates figure into the story because they, too, had hit a high-water mark in their career and it was hard to go anywhere and not hear their music or see their faces in advertising. Their music dramatically effected me as a kid not just because of the catchiness but because it may have been some of the first music that I had heard that made me realize that there was much more going on in music than just what was on the surface.

The music of Hall & Oates has endured quite nicely and has even begun to make a resurgence in the last number of years. I keep seeing more and more references to them in films, music and literature. The sounds they created were a definite touchstone for many of us, and young people are still discovering them today, which adds to the legitimacy of what they offered up.

I thought Hall & Oates served the story of *Greyhound* well, because the book is very much the same way. You can very quickly read this book in one setting and enjoy it, or you can read it at a slower pace and digest much more information as I've purposefully layered information in the book to make people think. Some readers might think that my technique of layering is a tactic, or a something done after the fact to pepper the book, but they couldn't be further from the truth. These are some of the first thoughts I had when planning *Greyhound* and having several things going on at once is just the way I write. Hall & Oates, and many other similar elements, were always supposed to be a part of the book. I wanted to have a thread about playing Chess, one of my other loves in life, but as the book came out and onto paper, I couldn't find a place for it and thus had to scale back my intentions. Not everything goes

according to plan.

5. *The book focuses on Stuttering, is this something else from your childhood?*

I stuttered a great deal as a child, and was teased intensely for it. I struggled as an adult to break free from it, not just because it is probably the most mentally debilitating and frustrating experience I think a child can have, but the stigma of it is unbearable. When people hear you stutter, they'll immediately shut down and dismiss what you have to tell them -- even if you're trying to tell them the chemical formula which may be the cure for cancer. Stuttering immediately makes people uncomfortable and they tune you out. It's a sad fact. Many times it won't matter how important your information is either, they'll think you're stupid and turn away. It may sound harsh, but as a society we've been led to believe that stupidity and speaking differently go hand in hand. Sadly, that just isn't the case. If you are reading this and you think my words are 'politically incorrect', then you probably haven't stuttered or felt the stigma or isolation of it. I haven't read much material over the years that purposefully covers this or does the reality of it justice, but I think it's something to be addressed.

I also do not give you the reader, the affliction of stuttering in obvious spoonfuls like some bad tasting medicine or in some base, pulp-fiction manner. I've done it in a way, if you're paying attention, that you'll experience stuttering, as a reader, the same way someone who stutters experiences it. Internally and with frustration. Having continuous sections of staccato dialogue is only the smallest part of stuttering and just the tip of the iceberg. It was always my hope to shed light on this struggle in this book and I hope that you can do your best to look for it. You shape the story you read here not by what you expect but by what you actually see and experience.

6. *Do you have any regrets about that period of your life?*

Other than surviving it? It may sound defeatist or nihilistic, but many times I'd wished I hadn't. I have lots of regrets. I'm just being honest here.

I've always maintained, firmly, that anybody that says that they don't have any regrets, is not only full of themselves -- but either in denial, or lying to you. We all have regrets. The real question is whether we are mature enough to admit them to ourselves and to other people. If someone says 'life is too short to have regrets,' I'd say watch your step. Life is too short not to meditate on our wrong turns, our failures or our fears.

I once heard that motivational speaker Brian Tracy say 'Success is across the sea of Failure.' It's true. You cannot have success in life if you haven't met with failure, lots of it in fact. And just because you succeeded on the 560th attempt to do something doesn't mean that you don't regret the time spent struggling through the other 559 tries. It's just not plausible. Joy gives way to the realization of 'was it worth it?' People who chase obsessions and meet their 'goals' often tell, very wisely, that it is not worth it. Everything has a cost and the price of it takes a heavy toll on us. Some will understand this fully, while many may not. It's like staring at the drawing of the woman looking into the mirror. What do you see?

Those years of my life took a heavy toll on me, no doubt. Things will never be what they probably should've been and I can't expect everyone to understand the real hell that some of us go through to get out the other side. It's not like Shawshank Redemption where you see Tim Robbins wearing a nicely

pressed white shirt and cruising the coast in a red convertible. I've done my best to recount those days to you. It may come across as foreign, or even too mature at times, but in those days I was forced to be mature and detached, wooden and flinching. I think many others in my similar situation, who read this book were, too. Surviving through trauma removes all the innocence from a person and starts to wallpaper over all that is missing with cynicism, self-loathing, sarcasm, heightened personal awareness and an unhealthy dose of self-sufficiency that is often more frustrating than rewarding.

7. Are there certain things that you're afraid to write about, or certain things that you won't write about?

Sure. Most of the things I see in my sleep at night are unfit for the printed page. I think I have a total of eight or nine more books about young Sebastien in me. After that, I may switch to either Science-Fiction or the genre known as Dystopian Fiction. My life has many unhappy days and twisted turns that people would scarce believe, but the truth is, as always, life is stranger than fiction and always will be. The more advanced we supposedly become, the more complex our stories unfold. Unlike the mode of storytelling in the classics, we cannot rely upon mythical beasts or Gods on mountain tops to elucidate our points.

I'm also afraid to write about many specific things from my life, too. As I bring back some of these stories to the surface there's the reality that other people who are involved in my life and other people I know sometimes want to see themselves in the roles of the characters. But that's the rub. Sometimes, no matter how much you tell someone that the character they're reading about is not them, they'll read into your words, your tone, believe what they want and run with it. It's the nature of the beast and that's for better or worse. Often times it's for the worse and has pain involved. Some people you'll just never reach and you're probably not meant to, either.

8. Did you always want to be a writer? Did you always see yourself that way?

Hahaha. Are you kidding me? Absolutely not. I never saw myself as a writer growing up, although I knew that I was going to write from a young age. When I was coming up in my teens and early twenties, the big struggle for me was to keep fed and to keep a roof over my head and to stay out of trouble. That was difficult enough. Some people might be reading this and thinking that there's not much special about that, because we all emotionally go through that, but with me, I often failed to do those things and I was on my own. I spent years not knowing who I was, or where I was going; and I don't mean that in a figurative sense either.

I had a very healthy fear of winding up in prison and I did everything I possibly could to avoid that. Thankfully, in that, I was successful. Everyday for me was a struggle and I'm blessed to have the life that I live now and I appreciate it. But during those many dark hours, I was writing. I was working on my books and a few times the only possessions I had was my writing. Looking back, that's a pretty sad statement, but it was what it was.

My mental perspective of what a writer is, or that lifestyle, was probably something glamorous like the Hitchcock version of Carey Grant. My mind had fantasized some Nuevo-rich single bachelor, living on the Med wearing yellow dress shirts, eating breakfast on the veranda, suntanned and well-womaned, sporting a twenty-four hour Cheshire-cat grin. That might sound incredibly romantic, but that's the way I formulated it then and it was about as far from reality as you could get, or at least in regards to the life that I was living.

9. Do you plan the material out before writing? What goes into creating a story like *Greyhound*?

Well, like I've said before, all the stories I write are true. I'm not writing memoirs, mind you, and I do fictionalize them as needed, but I have enough personal experiences from my real life that I don't actually have to make stuff up if I don't feel like it. I have enough material that could keep me going for the next twenty years or so but the story has to be compelling and compact and perform a certain amount of magic, otherwise it's journalism.

When it comes to the text and the message, I know exactly what I want to say with every book and I know what the hidden sub-plots are going to be and what subliminal messages I want to send out, too. But when the act of writing occurs, I'm like a train flying 'above' a set of tracks far off the ground. I can see it all below me, but the vehicle is definitely doing its own thing.

Stephen King frowns on stuff like this, but I'll readily admit that I plot and plan everything out that I'm going to write about. I have boxes of stuff that gets tucked away into my garage every time I finish writing a book. From detailed index cards that cover the walls of my office, bedroom and bathrooms (plural), to diaries, notebooks, sketches, stacks of photographs that I've collected from people, sources online and even ebay. I tend to get a bit obsessive with it. These are the things that keep me writing when it feels like it's the hardest thing to do and they keep me focused when it's flowing. One day when people are tripping over grocery store book racks of my stuff, maybe I'll change, but I'm far from that point yet.

Greyhound was something that I wrote very quickly. I actually had pneumonia and was in pretty bad shape during the period where I wrote the last 150 or so pages. I'm shocked I didn't get sidetracked and give up, but that's just how a burning desire forces you forward when you're in the thick of it. I'm glad it came out the way it did and I think I did honor to both my characters and the subject matter of *Greyhound* itself. I was honored by an Editor over at Penguin Books (ahem, lol) who said that 'It was an Elegy to Greyhound'. That's great marketing when your competition says something that fantastic about your book. They should blurb it on the back cover.

10. Some of the material in the book is pretty heady for an eleven year old boy turning twelve. Got anything to say about that?

I grew up in England and I'm the product of the British educational system, so that will always be an influence upon everything that I write. I had read Tolkien, Dickens and Arthur Conan Doyle completely and numerous times by this period in my life, so by no means was 'Steffan Piper' a dull child. My downfall was just in my ability to express these things outwardly, even though I struggled hard to do so where others didn't really have to. My upbringing reading the classics however, laced my day to day diction with archaic and Victorian words like 'bounder', 'hansom' and 'gaffer'. I once stuttered over the word 'miasma' in class and was teased about it for over a year. They put it to My Sherona: "M-m-m-my miasma!" The obvious and painful reality of being a kid seems like an everlasting motif.

When I was ten, Sherlock Holmes was my all time hero. Maybe it was the easiness with how he held himself against the solitary nature and the isolation of living amongst mortals that was so accessible in that material that I found appealing. I think it was the same for Dickens' *Twist* as well. These were themes I very quickly recognized and latched onto at that age. Shortly after that, when I was twelve reading Carlos Castaneda, his books definitely changed my life. The idea of releasing and letting go of

your self-image, during a period of my life where I was supposed to be finding that out, was alluring, and I knew better, too. I gripped onto Castaneda for dear life for about four or five years. I read those books so many times, I probably scared a few counselors at school, lol.

During the editing we discussed some of the language as well and we edited the language down dramatically. One of the editors railed in a spirited discussion that a twelve year old wouldn't use the word 'Cacophony.' Sadly, I buckled. A few weeks later, I heard that word and few others I took out, spoken by none other than Spongebob Squarepants. For the record, Spongebob is geared for five year olds. My heart broke like a piece of dry wood in fall, if you were anywhere near me, you might've been able to have heard it.

I think when we start thinking as adults that we need to limit material to what we believe young people are capable of, or is normal to them, we immediately have done them a disservice, because most of them would probably shame us in regards to what we know, or think we know.

I had a handful of early readers tackle *Greyhound* and several were teenagers and few around the age of young Sebastien. All of them loved the book and found it intelligent and provocative. I was told that they had wished that more books were written like this and spoke to them so clearly. While a few of my British readers wondered why I was using American spelling, understandably, none of them thought the language was out of place for the character.

11. How long have you been writing?

I wrote my first novel while on a battlefield in Saudi Arabia in 1991. I can't believe I just typed that out as it's the first time anyone has ever asked. I've been writing stories though as far back as I can recall. I used to be obsessed writing love letters to girls that hated me and more so, poetry. But I think those two things can often be one in the same. What I didn't know at the time is that it was preparing me to start a habit of keeping a diary or journal for the rest of my life.

I was never popular in school. I moved so frequently when I was young that the number of different schools I attended is probably in the teens. A few times we moved twice a year. Looking back on it now, I don't envy that kind of life for anyone as you're academically hobbled whether you're aware of it or not. Struggling free of it is something most never come to terms with and something few succeed in. Have I succeeded in that? I don't know. I'm still in school even now. I've written numerous unpublished manuscripts and I still feel as if I haven't gotten through to anyone but myself. Possibly that's what it's all about though. I'm content with it, if that's so.

12. What authors have inspired you?

Charles Dickens and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle have been staples in my reading, or mainstays rather, since reading time for me began. I still read *Oliver Twist* once a year and every year and have done so for the last twenty. I usually pull down a copy in late January and read the essays first. It's hard for me to fathom the possibility that Dickens was not writing solely to me in those first few years with *Twist* and *Great Expectations*. I very much identified with most of what he wrote.

With Doyle, it was an obvious trap for me to walk into. I was immediately drawn to Sherlock Holmes for the fact that he was so content in being withdrawn from normal people and he functioned better doing so and at a higher efficiency as well. I never wanted to be a doctor, but I damn sure wanted to know the secrets of both men and women. Surviving in the world as a detached person these days

seems impossible, but back then it was an imperative.

In High School I found Carlos Castaneda and while I was advised by teachers, counselors and others to not read so much Castaneda, I couldn't help but devour all of it. For an impressionable teen his world was everything. Literature, fiction, religion, sociology, psychology, spirituality. You name it – it had it. I was thirteen reading about dismantling your self-image and your persona while everyone around me was slapping crap onto theirs doing the same thing I was, which was trying to survive, but apparently going in the opposite direction. It shaped me without doubt.

13. Was there any other influences from your life that affected the material or shaped the theme?

Short answer: Marvin Gaye and Langston Hughes.

Strangely, one of the biggest influences on my life through the years was a celebrity. I don't often talk about it, but for the record it was Marvin Gaye. I had listened to his music growing up and felt incredibly close to records like *'What's Going On.'* Music was really the only escape for growing up in an impoverished life full of adult children that couldn't figure out how to get themselves together or that what they were doing was inappropriate. I bring this up because when you don't have good role models immediately near you, you have a tendency to look for them in unlikely and often unfulfilling places.

1984 when I read that Marvin Gaye Sr. had shot his son in a fit of anger and insanity; I couldn't understand how the world could treat someone like that so unkind as to put them in such harms way. It bothered me and I probably carried it around for far too long and it may have further cemented my distrust of men and figures of authority in general. I internalized those things back then maybe too deeply, but it was what it was. We're all affected by life and our experiences, mine just came from a completely external source or wherever I could find them. Good or bad.

My hope is for the reader to walk away with something good, feel better or perhaps - see themselves within the pages and not feel alone.

The Langston Hughes thread within the story is actually something that has caused me a great deal of pain recently, but it's also something, currently, better left alone. I was always a huge fan of his work, I knew he would be a character in the book, even if in a small way. The first time I had been introduced to his poetry or poetry at all, was on a Greyhound bus. Poetry was the first thing I started writing, so you could probably, and very safely, say that Langston Hughes inspired me to be a writer. That's just how it went.

14. Who is your favorite character?

My favourite character in *Greyhound* is undoubtedly Marcus Franklin because he is a person that directly influenced me in real life

On a side note, Mr. Hastings ranks up pretty high, because while he was also a real person that I met during those trips, during the writing, I had no physical memory of him (dress, attire, face) so I modeled him after Claude Rains's character Captain Renault from *Casablanca*, replete with well-pressed uniform, mannerisms and a young female assistant.

Study Guide Questions ...

Chapter 1:

1. What object does Sebastien identify with while lying in bed?
2. What nickname does Sebastian's mother address him as?
3. What reason does Charlotte give for sending him away?
4. What specifically does Sebastien notice about the soldiers?
5. Why did Sebastien begin to feel sick when he took his seat on the bus?
6. How did Dick's treatment of Sebastien make you feel?

Chapter 2:

1. What does Jim give Sebastien?
2. What did the trees outside the terminal remind Sebastien of?
3. What did Sebastien make note of after he hugged Jenny, the waitress?
4. What song is playing overhead after Sebastien goes to the restroom?
5. Who will Sebastien supposedly meet up with in Los Angeles?
6. Why does a fight break out on the bus and where?

Chapter 3:

1. What is the name of Mr. Hasting's female assistant?
2. What does Sebastien notice about the Soldiers in Los Angeles?
3. What does Mr. Hasting's give Sebastien?
4. What does Sebastien notice about the bus driver's overhead announcements?
5. What was the name of the book Marcus has with him?
6. What does 'a dream deferred' mean to you?
7. What does Marcus get Sebastien in Palm Springs, California?

Chapter 4:

1. What does Sebastien purchase in Phoenix, Arizona?
2. What does the girl behind the counter give Sebastien?

3. Where does Monty say Daryl Hall will earn a spot?
4. What does the bald man tell Sebastien?
5. What does the Hot-Line button do?
6. What happens to Sebastien in Flagstaff?
7. What does Marcus give to Sebastien and tell him not to lose?

Chapter 5:

1. What does Sebastien discover on the bus floor and what does he think it is at first?
2. What happened to 'Amber'?
3. What happens to Marcus and Sebastien in 'Roger's Café'?
4. What does Marcus tell Sebastien, after breakfast, about his mother?
5. What code do Marcus, Monty and Sebastien come up with and why?
6. What day is it in the book and what significance does it have?

Chapter 6:

1. What poem does Marcus read to Sebastien?
2. What cassette tape does Marcus give to Sebastien to listen to?
3. Who do our heroes meet in the terminal and what is he famous for?
4. What do you think a 'Chicago Typewriter' is?
5. What does Harley give to Sebastien?
6. What does Marcus order to eat from the truck?
7. What book does Marcus point out to Sebastien in Amarillo?
8. Who is Micheal Devin and what is the significance of that name?

Chapter 7:

1. What does Sebastien dream about and what do you think it means?
2. What happens to the bus and what is the old Navajo man doing?
3. What happens when Sebastien calls back to his mother's house?
4. What is the 'Okey-doke'?
5. What does Sebastien steal from the old Trailways bus?
6. Where are the two Navajo men traveling to and why?

7. What is the name of the new bus driver?

Chapter 8:

1. Why does Marcus get off in Mount Vernon, Missouri with Sebastien?
2. What are the oil paintings of in the donut shop?
3. What's Sebastien's grandfather's name and what do the townsfolk address him as?
4. What nationality do most people think Sebastien is?
5. What famous line from Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* appears in this chapter?
6. What's inside the suitcases?
7. What song is playing on the radio?

Chapter 9:

1. What does Sebastien write in his notebook?
2. What poem does Sebastien read?
3. What occurs between Sebastien and Jackie? How does the reader feel about it?
4. What does Sebastien think of the St. Louis Arch?
5. What does Marcus get that makes him almost miss the bus?
6. What's the name of the small deli in Altoona on Kettle Street?
7. What's the 'one thing' Marcus tells Sebastien about girls?
8. Who is Roger McDougall-Daggett and what does he tell Sebastien?
9. What affected you most in this chapter?

Chapter 10:

1. Does Sebastian say anything about the luggage and why/why not?
2. How long was he passed out in bed?
3. What does Marcus tell Sebastien about his own mother in the letter?
4. What word does Sebastien use in Scrabble and for how many points?
5. How do you feel about Sebastien's father?
6. What was the most indelible moment of the book?
7. What did you take from this book and what was learned?