



Alden Nowlan

“He Sits Down on the Floor of a School for the Retarded”

Discussion Plan

Opening Exercise:

- Write for a few minutes about a time in your life when you felt “ignorant of the accepted etiquette” for a particular situation. Why did you feel like you were blundering or apt to blunder?

Questions for Discussion:

- Why is the narrator at this school?
- What does the narrator mean when he says that to the audience, the band is “everybody/who has ever appeared on TV”?
- If Nowlan's narrator is there to write a story, he quickly learns that he's there for something else—to try and provide help, maybe, and definitely not to do harm (in the form of lying and fondling). What changes him?
- Why does the narrator lie to the boy seeking an autograph? Why does he feel ashamed about this?
- The boy requesting the autograph is described as “more hopeless than defiant.” What kinds of experiences might have caused him to react this way? Who, in your experience, does this remind you of? Has this ever been you?
- What motivated the narrator to send an autograph “signed by somebody/ on the same payroll as the star”? Does this make any difference? Who does this act benefit more: the writer or the boy?
- “Then I’ll feel less ashamed,” the writer says. Does shame serve a purpose? Is it helpful or harmful here? How do we benefit from shame? Does shame sometimes keep us from doing things we ought to?
- What does the young woman want when she rests her head on the narrator’s shoulder? Does she “know better”? Do we know that she doesn’t know better? What if she weren’t retarded – how would that change this moment, and the poem?
- What does narrator mean when he says that he is “ignorant/ of the accepted etiquette”? What is the purpose of etiquette? Why couldn’t the narrator rely on his instincts in this situation?

- Why does the narrator look for a teacher to whom he can “smile out [his] distress”? Why can’t he smile distress to one of the students? Do you have someone who serves this purpose for you, at work or elsewhere?
- What do you think of the last two stanzas? Does anyone see a change in tone here? Is the narrator correct in saying, “it’s what we all want, in the end, / to be held”? Do you believe this? Do you think Nowlan believes it?
- When the narrator and the woman hug, why does he refer to her as “this retarded woman”?
- Which had a greater benefit: the narrator hugging the woman or Nowlan writing this poem? Would this story have done more good in the form of a mass-market magazine article?
- Why does this poem end two hundred thousand years in the past?

Closing Exercise:

- If you could see any two groups of people sitting on the floor together, which would they be?

Go around the circle and have everyone give an answer, without explaining the reasons for their answer.