

# **Do Black Patent-leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?: A Fictionalized Memoir Study Guide**

**Do Black Patent-leather Shoes Really Reflect Up?: A Fictionalized Memoir by John R. Powers**

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## Plot Summary

Eddie Ryan's adolescence is typical of that of a Catholic teen living on the South Side of Chicago during the 1950s and early 1960s. Raised in the parish grammar school, Eddie is now entering Bremmer High School, an all boys Catholic High School, run by the Brothers of St. Bremmer Order. Enduring the pain of pimples, dandruff, and body odor, Eddie launches into his high school years without exuberance but, nevertheless, with good friends who typify the wide variety of personalities one finds in most any high school. Catholic education is not particularly exciting, considering that the classes consist of boring lectures, reading textbooks and taking tests. Eddie is not a stellar student in any class, except perhaps for that of new history teacher, Ed Kascher, who, in Eddie's estimation, is the only true teacher at Bremmer. As Eddie recounts a series of small vignettes, each a special gem from his personal history, the reader gains great insight into both the challenges of being an adolescent during this time and, as well, the specific challenges of being a Catholic teen. From humor ("Unless you plan on becoming a priest, there is no reason in the world to learn Latin. Not only is the language dead but so are most of the people who teach it.") to sarcasm ("Mixed marriages, unlike regular Catholic marriages, were not allowed to be performed within the railings of the altar. Obviously God wasn't in any big rush to get too close to a non-Catholic either"), to anger ("If Lanner had been the type that made noise—an athlete, a school-spirit nut ...someone at Bremmer would have figured out a way to keep him... Just being a nice guy didn't count"), the reader is given small but key peeks into the life and thoughts of a young man searching for his identity within a culturally traditional, and at times suffocating, community. While not a stellar student, Eddie nevertheless masters important life lessons, as he seeks to make sense of his adolescent years, his roller coaster love life, and his faith.

Against the backdrop of Eddie's tale, the foreshadowing of social upheaval provides an undercurrent of impending unrest. Eddie himself hints at these issues with his comments about the lack of minorities in his school and neighborhood, the Church's low opinion of women, and the inequities of social class distinctions, as well as the Church's willingness to tolerate these conditions. The insulated world in which Eddie has grown up will give way to a much more complex, diverse, and fractured society. Still, in his rather ordinary life, Eddie has probably found the values that will provide the resilience he will need—hope for a better future, friendship, love, and a sense of humor.



# Chapter 1, Ready?

## Chapter 1, Ready? Summary

Eddie Ryan has turned thirteen, and, overnight, he has witnessed the horrors of being a teenager—pimples, dandruff, a changing voice, and body odor—as he finishes the eighth grade at St. Bastion Catholic Grammar School. He has managed to finally earn decent grades and faces high school with ambivalence, excited to turn a new page in his life but somewhat concerned about the potential academic expectations. He has chosen Bremmer High School, along with friends Tom Lanner and Tim Heidi, a Catholic boys' school run by the Brothers of the St. Bremmer Order. For Southside Chicago teens, Bremmer is a good school, from which deserving students can go on to good colleges. Also accepted to Bremmer is Felix Lindor, the "filth fiend" of the eighth grade. In addition to having the "dirtiest" mind, he has taught other eighth grades boys how to walk around for hours with no destination and to be appropriately opaque when answering adults' questions.

In order to attend Bremmer, as well as other Catholic High Schools, an entrance exam is given throughout the archdiocese, and, based upon one's scores, certain schools are available. Timmy Heidi, much to the shock of the grammar school nuns, has achieved the highest score and will be attending Bremmer on a full scholarship. During his grammar school years, Timmy consistently earns poor grades, because he questions the nuns. This behavior always impacts one's grades negatively.

The summer between grammar and high school finds Eddie continuing his daily "pimple patrol" and delivering newspapers in leg casts, having been diagnosed with Osgood-Schlatter's Disease, a relatively common but curable affliction. Life is relatively uncomplicated in his early adolescent and still innocent existence. The problems of the world, indeed, even of his own future, are too far removed to be of importance.

## Chapter 1, Ready? Analysis

This first chapter introduces Eddie Ryan, a young man who is experiencing all of the typical issues of adolescence and puberty. He has become acutely aware of his appearance, demonstrated by his rush to the mirror every morning, in order to check for any new pimples, and his distaste of developing body odor. Like early teens, as well, Eddie still lives in the "short-term," that is, he is concerned with the next twenty-four hours of his life and does not look toward the far future. His life is filled with self-absorption and his buddies.

The reader is also given glimpses into the traditional Catholic education of the 1950s. Grammar school is a strict environment, controlled by even stricter nuns, who insist upon compliance and conformity. The good student is one who completes his homework, remains quiet and compliant in class, and accepts, without question,

everything he or she is told by the infallible nuns. To question or to defy them is to be a poor student, though, in fact, as evidenced by Timmy Heidi, compliance and conformity does not measure intelligence.



# Chapter 2, Bremmer High School

## Chapter 2, Bremmer High School Summary

Dress codes at Bremmer High are typically strict for the time, including acceptable hair styles, a "sport coat, tie and belt," (p. 29). Teachers are comprised of the brothers of the St. Bremmer Religious Order and additional lay male faculty as necessary. Corporal punishment is thoroughly accepted, and upperclassmen relish terrorizing new Freshmen with stories of beatings given by specific brothers. While most of these tales are patently false, one teacher, Brother Well, lives up to this reputation. A former boxer, he has been transferred to Bremmer after having punched two football players at another school. No one crosses Brother Well after this story is circulated.

There are four programs of study at Bremmer, and placement is based upon entrance exam scores. The Honors Program, to which Heidi is assigned, are for the brightest, of course. Except for Heidi, most of these students are considered "geeks" by today's standards. The Engineering Program is designed for those intelligent students who fall just below the score for the Honors Program. The top two programs prepare students for college. Third in line is the Academic Program, designed for the "average" students. Eddie, Tom, and Felix land here. The Business Program houses the lowest rung of students, those who obviously will not pursue higher education and who are most assuredly destined for the military or semi-skilled labor careers.

On the first day of high school, Eddie is thoroughly captured by Principal Brother Purity's address to the student body. He vows to work as hard as he can, earn varsity letters in sports and become involved in as many extra-curricular activities as possible. It takes him only the weekend to return to his senses and realize that he has no desire to do any of these things. The first several months as a Freshman confirm his decision. He is passing only three of his five major subjects—English, religion, and general science. English has always come easily, and religion is "unflunkable," so long as one continues to claim to love God. In general science, teacher Mr. Luce is not failing anyone, due primarily to his nervous breakdown, thanks to harassment by one of his classes, composed of more than the average number of "clowns."

Algebra and Latin are Eddie's downfalls. While the algebra teacher is a nice man, Eddie cannot grasp the subject, nor does he see its relevance. Latin, again, has no relevance, but it is further torpedoed by Brother Coratelli, a man who does not practice personal hygiene and does not like Eddie's "attitude." Ultimately, Eddie confesses to himself that he is simply lazy in these two subjects and does not complete the daily work that might improve his grades. He earns an F in Latin and faces summer school.



## Chapter 2, Bremmer High School Analysis

Eddie's description of high school in the late 1950s and early 1960s is typical of both private and public schools of the times. Although the Catholic dress code is certainly stricter, the concept of programs of study, into which students are slotted based upon some test or teacher assessment, was rather universal during this time. It was generally believed that students should be "tracked," so that the most capable could be given the benefit of the most highly scholastic coursework while those less capable would be given appropriate training for their "station" in life. The fact that there are no minority students at Bremmer is another trademark of most private schools during the times. These social issues are only sketchily treated by author Powers, but it is clear that he sees them as incorrect.

Teaching methodologies during this time period are also aptly described. Class time was spent reading or completing largely unfulfilling assignments. Lectures were common, during which students were expected to pay prompt attention and to take copious notes in order to be able to study for the fact-based tests to come. Eddie finds his courses lacking in relevance, for he can find no practical use for much of what he learns, particularly in Latin and Algebra. He demonstrates what occurs in most classrooms across the country, that is, a failure of students to master skills and content when they are not able to see usefulness in that which is taught. Learning for the joy of learning is not where the majority of high school students are.



## Chapter 3, Catholic Girls

### Chapter 3, Catholic Girls Summary

As an adolescent in a Catholic high school, Eddie is introduced to the proper degree of affiliation with "public," or non-Catholics. If Catholic boys associate with public boys, they are expected to set a good example for them. They are never, however, to associate with "public" girls, because to do so will be to court the disaster of a mixed marriage. This is not the only "don't," and Eddie begins to view the Catholic Church as a religion of "don'ts" and tedious rules to follow, so that, eventually, one dies and goes to Heaven. Looming large in the realm of "don'ts" is sex before marriage. Once married, moreover, the primary purpose of sex is procreation, not enjoyment.

The Church is also sexist at this time, probably because it has never forgiven Eve. Women cannot be priests and so can have no power in the Church. Further, they are told from adolescence forward that one must remain pure until marriage. Dressing modestly is another battle cry, it being spiritual to cover as much of the body as possible. Patent leather shoes are forbidden, because they might reflect what is under a skirt or dress. Wearing make up displeases God and gives a "signal" to boys, who think of nothing but food and sex throughout their adolescence. Strict guidelines for dating are given to girls as well. Group dating is safest and should be practiced until much later in adolescence. At dances and sock hops, the chaperoning nuns insist that at least a phone book must separate the dancing bodies from each other. Equally strict rules are given to the girls regarding kissing and steady dating, and this means that Eddie is going to have a very frustrating dating life.

### Chapter 3, Catholic Girls Analysis

In this chapter, Eddie takes the reader back to a time experienced by those who are now in their sixties. Adolescents attending Catholic schools during the 1950s and 1960s were subject to a thorough indoctrination relative to dating and sex. The goal, of course, was to avoid the impending "doom" of out-of-wedlock pregnancies or, almost as bad, marriage to a non-Catholic. Necking, petting and sexual intercourse were mortal sins, according to the Church, punishable by the fires of Hell and damnation unless one confessed his/her sins often and undertook the penance prescribed by the confessional priest. Eddie, of course, sees these rules as certainly confining, however, it does not appear that he is willing to break them and tempt his fate. While he rails against the strictness, he nevertheless intends to remain compliant. He is not so forgiving regarding the sexism of the Church and truly criticizes the chauvinistic attitude toward women, who are quite literally second class citizens within the faith and within Catholic society.





# Chapter 4, The Beautiful World of Richard Bobbo

## Chapter 4, The Beautiful World of Richard Bobbo Summary

Since there are no non-Catholics or minorities at Bremmer High School, the issue is whom to tease and bully. Athletes and the "spirit nuts," who participate in as many activities as possible, are on the highest social rungs and are untouchable. The next rung consists of the "nice guys." Fat and ugly students comprise the bottom rung. Even the faculty deems them lowly and tends to give them both poorer grades and more detentions. Eddie is neither fat nor ugly but often feels so on the inside.

The student government is run by the fat and ugly kids, primarily because it has no real power, and cool kids want nothing to do with it. The real power lies with the athletes. To be elected student body president, moreover, is the worst insult. Such is the fate of Richard Bobbo, both fat and ugly, with acne and dandruff as well. Fat and ugly boys do not take Physical education. Instead, the coaches assign them menial tasks. Bobbo's is to hand out towels from behind a wire cage, following the mandatory post-class shower. Tired of his treatment, Bobbo decides it is time for payback and picks the strongest, best athlete in the school as his target—Bert Bensen. Refusing to give the naked, dripping Bert a towel, Bobbo begins his defiance. Angry, Bert attempts to leap through the opening in the cage, getting himself stuck, as he tries to grab Bobbo. Bobbo leaves the locker room. From that moment, Bensen is out to get Bobbo, stalking him after school, but never successful. Bobbo achieves a final victory in a cafeteria prank and becomes the hero of all of the fat and ugly students from that point forward.

## Chapter 4, The Beautiful World of Richard Bobbo Analysis

The issue of social cliques among adolescents seems to be universal, no matter the era or generation. Like any High school, public or private, there are those who seem to have been genetically blessed with good looks and physiques and possess a revered position in the social hierarchy. In the middle are the average-looking teens, like Eddie, who have friends and a social life. At the bottom, however, are those who are not blessed and who suffer the pangs of social isolation, who never make the rounds of teenage parties and dances, who walk the halls, attend classes, and "get through" their high school years. In Eddie's time, it seems that teasing and bullying these students is a "given" and certainly accepted by even the teachers and administration of Bremmer High School. The issue of bullying is very different today, and one is a bit disturbed to think that, in any time, the bullying of less fortunate students could be so tolerated and condoned.



# Chapter 5, My Sister was a Piano Freak

## Chapter 5, My Sister was a Piano Freak Summary

Music lessons are important for children because they are deemed to be a mark of maturity. Eddie's older sister begins piano lessons in the first grade and, as a result, much family time is spent looking for a used piano for the budding musician. Feeling a little jealous, Eddie purchases a harmonica at the local dime store and teaches himself to play it in short order. Older sister is unimpressed, stating that the piano is the most perfect instrument. By the time she reaches high school, like so many others, the piano is seldom played. Finally, Eddie's father assigns to him the task of chopping up the piano for the trash collector. Eddie is surprised at his ambivalence. While he relishes destroying the instrument that had been played by his sister at every family gathering, he is sobered by the contemplation that this instrument was once new and cherished by one who is probably now in a nursing home.

## Chapter 5, My Sister was a Piano Freak Analysis

It appears that Eddie has a typical sibling relationship with his sister. Though not much information is given about her, this vignette speaks to normal sibling rivalry and jealousy. At the same time, a hint is given that Eddie may be maturing a bit. Even though a rather self-centered adolescent, he nevertheless stops to contemplate the history of a musical instrument that was once new and owned by a child who perhaps found joy in it.



# Chapters 6-8, Mixers, Bippo, Una

## Chapters 6-8, Mixers, Bippo, Una Summary

The next three chapters provide small pictures of recollections Eddie has, each a small look into typical adolescent life. In Chapter 6, the reader is introduced to "mixers," the beginning of the mating ritual for Catholic adolescents. Mixers are Friday night social events held in church basements or in school gyms, complete with phonograph music and soft drinks. Those held in the fall are particularly important, because both sexes are looking for their new loves for the school year. At the beginning of his sophomore year, Eddie begins the mixer circuit, meeting Dolores Crosley, a gorgeous girl with no personality. He asks her to a movie the following Saturday, a date she accepts. Eddie spends the duration of the movie attempting to muster the courage to put his arm around Dolores but is unable to do so. After several more dates and visits to her home, during which time Dolores can utter no more than "yes," "no," or "I don't know," Eddie decides that her supreme good looks are simply not enough, and that some handsome, rich, athlete can have her. Undaunted, Eddie continues to attend mixers during the fall and eventually meets an attractive and conversant girl with whom he becomes immediately infatuated. Failing to get her name, he does discover that she intends to attend a mixer the next week at St. Bruno's Parish. Friend Heidi claims he knows the location of St. Bruno's but, in fact, does not. They miss the entire mixer in an attempt to find the site, and Eddie is obviously furious with his friend.

Chapter seven introduces the reader to "Bippo," alias for George Gelby, an overweight, squat fellow, who has decided to run cross country. Cross country players congregate at one end of the football field each afternoon in the fall, run down the sidelines of the field and then jog through the surrounding neighborhoods, building up their stamina for meets against other teams throughout the season. One afternoon, Bippo gets into an altercation with some of the football players and is immediately recruited by the football coach, who has observed that Bippo can withstand multiple tacklers at once and keep moving. During the tough homecoming game against St. Francis, Bippo manages three touchdowns, the final score resulting in a loss by only one point, the best showing ever by Bremmer against St. Francis. Bremmer fans are ecstatic, and Bippo is to be given the most valuable award at the homecoming dance that evening. During the presentation, however, Bippo argues with the homecoming queen and punches her out.

Una represents that first love experienced by many adolescent boys, the girl who captures their hearts but with whom they never manage permanency. Chapter eight finds Eddie taking shelter under the awning of a custard stand during a rainstorm, where he meets Una. He is immediately in love, and pursues her relentlessly. Since she lives only six blocks away, seeing her every evening is a simple matter. The romance continues as Eddie gets older, but it certainly is not monogamous on Una's part. The relationship is marked by on and off again regularity every few months. Eventually, it ends permanently.



## Chapters 6-8, Mixers, Bippro, Una Analysis

Most male adults can recollect the painful years of attending casual dances and the pangs of asking a girl to dance, hoping not to be turned down, or avoiding the inevitable girl who wants to dance and with whom one has no desire to be seen. Making the rounds of these dances has but one goal—finding a good-looking female to date for the remainder of the year, if possible. Even female readers can relate to this "mating" ritual, having spent countless hours standing on the sides of a gym or cafeteria, waiting for a special someone to ask her to dance, hoping to find "Mr. Right." Eddie typifies the young, illogical teen, who fails to get the name of a girl with whom he is completely enamored and then spends hours looking for her in vain. Finally, Eddie meets Una, a young lady who fits the bill entirely, being both attractive and conversant. The relationship itself is typical of teenage romance, as well, with its breakups and reconciliations throughout high school. In retrospect, Eddie realizes that Una was one of a kind and that he was a fool to have allowed her to get away. Adults always hold a special place in their hearts for that "first love," and Eddie is no exception.



# Chapter 9, Among Others, Smooth Eddie

## Chapter 9, Among Others, Smooth Eddie Summary

Teachers at Bremmer are comprised of brothers and male lay faculty. When brothers become elderly and less than effective teachers, they are relegated first to easier teaching assignments, such as part-time class loads or to teaching typing. When they become even less effective, they are relegated to an assistant to the vice-principal assignment, a position that entails answering phones in the office. Brother Sens was probably ineffective from his first day, primarily because he is crazy. Transferred from one school to another, he lands at Bremmer as a typing teacher. Much of the class time, however, is spent enlightening students on a variety of topics. His teaching strategies include attempting to distract the students while they type and then punching any student who indeed becomes distracted by his antics.

Lay teachers are always young and badly paid. The majority are working on advanced degrees and quit shortly after said degree is obtained. One exception is history teacher, Mr. Blair, a non-assertive middle-aged man who cannot control a classroom. Finally, Mr Blair quits and is replaced by a "tyrant." The party is clearly over for the world history students. Gradually, however, new teacher Ed Kascher, grows on his students, and his lectures begin to make sense. His nickname becomes "Smooth Eddie," and he is clearly the favorite of Bremmer students, for his nontraditional teaching and his disregard for the "system." As Eddie states, "Even at the time I was in class, I thought that Smooth Eddie was a damn good teacher. A few years after high school, I felt he was a great one. Today I realize he was the only one." (p. 180)

## Chapter 9, Among Others, Smooth Eddie Analysis

All high school students have strong opinions about most of their teachers. It is universal to experience those that are ineffective, either because they make the subject matter boring, cannot relate to adolescents, or have no ability to control the behavior of their students. It is just as easy to recognize the good ones—those who make the subject exciting and relevant, who force students to engage in critical thinking or to solve difficult problems. These teachers expect and demand much of their students but, in addition to having students' respect, they enjoy good relationships with them. These are the teachers students fondly recall far into adulthood. For Eddie, good teachers are rare, because attending a Catholic school, run by a religious order, the majority of teachers are brothers of that order and are placed in a classroom whether they can teach or not. While the truly horrible teachers are eventually removed to other positions, a large majority of teachers remain in the classroom even though teaching is not their true calling. In a public school, bad teachers can be weeded out before they attain tenure, but in Catholic schools, they are liable to remain and are mediocre at best. It is a sad commentary on Eddie's education for him to realize that Mr. Blair is the only truly good teacher he has.



# Chapter 10, Double Dating with Feliz Lindor

## Chapter 10, Double Dating with Feliz Lindor Summary

Dating for the average Catholic adolescent is an art form of devising means by which one can touch a girl, whether it be by slow dancing, in a car, on a ride at an amusement park or at the movies, preferably a drive-in. Getting a Catholic girl to "neck" usually involves time, for she will not succumb to that activity unless she believes the boy to be her "steady." Most Catholic boys, moreover, date within their own social class, adhering to parent and Church teachings. Felix Linder, however, is the exception.

Felix dates everyone and is clearly after only one thing—lots of touching. On one occasion, Felix asks Eddie to double date with him, because he cannot get his father's car. Felix has a date with an "easy" girl named Cynthia. Eddie's date is Barbara, a friend with whom there will be no touching. The date ends on a dark dirt road in a huge park, where it has earlier been agreed that Eddie and Barbara will take a walk, so that Felix and Cynthia can be alone in Eddie's car. Felix does not get what he is after, and the dirt road is actually a horse path. A horse runs into Eddie's hood, breaking the windshield with its hoof, and the four teens end up at the police station. The horse has to be euthanized, and Eddie is faced with the task of explaining to his father how this has all come about.

## Chapter 10, Double Dating with Feliz Lindor Analysis

Most adult readers can look back upon at least one similar instance from their own teen years, and find humor in a situation that at the time was certainly less than funny, particularly when explanations for misconduct had to be given to parents. The entire scene of being parked on a dark road, couples "necking" in the back seat of cars, and the potential for discovery is all familiar. Beneath the humorous story, however, is a more serious statement, however. High school teens during the 1950s and early 1960s typically moved in specific social groups, keeping to their "own kind," or social class, as Eddie describes it. Adolescents of that time were far less likely to move far from their own neighborhoods and schools and far less likely to seek out even platonic relationships with other teens from more different backgrounds. It was a time of cohesiveness among social classes that is not the norm today.



# Chapter 11, Retreat Retreat

## Chapter 11, Retreat Retreat Summary

The construction of a Catholic conscience begins at an early age and continues through high school, consistently built by parents, nuns and priests. Religion classes are mandatory in all Catholic schools, at all grade levels, but high school religion classes focus primarily on the mortal sins of sex—petting, going all the way, masturbation, and even thoughts of such things. One brother, in order to make his point, suggests to the students that, whenever they are tempted to commit a mortal sin, they light a match and stick a finger into the flame. The pain is just a small taste of the pain in Hell, he claims, where the entire body will be engulfed in flames for eternity.

The most important attempt to solidify a Catholic conscience comes every year with the annual retreat. For three days, the teens are subjected to masses, stations of the cross, sermons, and meditations, all designed to "offer the individual a spiritual reprieve from the materialistic world he daily lives in," (p. 207). By the time Eddie is in high school, he has heard the same stories in the same sermons many times. By the senior year, retreat sermons focus on marriage, under the assumption that those who do not go into the priesthood or go on to college will find employment and marry shortly after graduation. It is therefore critical that the boys understand the primary purpose of marriage—procreation. Companionship and satisfaction of one's sex drive are completely subordinate purposes.

## Chapter 11, Retreat Retreat Analysis

The Catholic Church of the 1950s and 1960s is quite a rigid institution. To control its "flock," and to ensure its perpetuation, it establishes fundamental and very specific regulations which followers have to practice in order to avoid the tortures of Hell. These rules are passed on through families, not just by their lifestyles but by enrolling their children in Catholic schools, in order to keep them "protected" from the non-Catholic world. The hope is that, if Catholic indoctrination can occur through high school, it will last a lifetime. Further, in these times, Catholic neighborhoods are perpetuated as well, small communities surrounding a parish church in which everyone knows one another and attends school and church together.

Rules regarding dating and relationships between the sexes are especially stringent, both to avoid mortal sins of sexual behavior and, worse, out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Even thoughts of sexual conduct are considered sinful. The primary purpose of marriage, according to the Church, is to produce children, with companionship and physical pleasure clearly secondary in importance. This teaching is especially important as older teens prepare themselves for life after high school, because during Eddie's time and within his social class, many complete their formal education with high school

graduation and are counseled to find solid employment and settle down with a good Catholic girl.





# Chapter 12-14, My Car; Leaving; Late Bloomer

## Chapter 12-14, My Car; Leaving; Late Bloomer Summary

Chapter 12 recounts the dream of every teenage boy to have his own car. After all, it offers independence and the opportunity to neck and pet whenever the opportunity arises. Eddie is no exception. In order to afford a car, Eddie takes a part-time busboy position. He ultimately purchases an old car from a crazy co-worker, the only real option, given what he has to spend. The car is an immediate disaster and certainly does not serve its purpose, given the fact that if it is stopped on a lonely road, it invariably will not start again. Eventually, Eddie sells the car for one dollar to a neighborhood boy, but he recalls the period of ownership with great nostalgia. He has enjoyed a short period of the exhilaration of car ownership, an experience that most of his friends do not have, certainly not Tom Lanner, who never has enough money.

Tom Lanner and Eddie have remained friends throughout high school, and Chapter 13 finds them both ready for their senior years. Tom lives with relatives and any money he earns must be applied toward his tuition at Bremmer. As they are about to enter their senior year, Tom announces that he must leave Bremmer, because he can no longer afford the tuition. If he had been a star athlete or student, Eddie knows, the brothers would find a way to keep him. Just being a nice guy does not carry enough weight.

As his senior year marches forward, in Chapter 14, Eddie must begin to think of his future, and he is scheduled for the mandatory session with the guidance counselor, Brother O'Connell. O'Connell was once a teacher in New York, but, following a rather severe nervous breakdown, he has been sent to Bremmer and given this "desk job." He informs Eddie that, of course, he is not college material and should consider joining the Army. Undaunted, Eddie secures the aid of Timmy Heidi, who completes and sends off five college applications for Eddie. This is a difficult task for Timmy, for Eddie has neither accumulated excellent grades nor participated in extracurricular activities of any note. One institution, Sabina College in Wisconsin, accepts Eddie, and he has momentary elation until his sister informs him that Sabina is an all-girls college.

## Chapter 12-14, My Car; Leaving; Late Bloomer Analysis

Again, three common teenage experiences are recounted in these three chapters. In a frenzy to own their own vehicles, teens will often act impulsively and purchase a clunker that is clearly on its last leg, hoping that somehow God will intervene and keep it rolling. Instead, such vehicles become serious financial liabilities, requiring more work than can



be afforded and are often junked, resulting in the loss of the coveted independence that vehicle ownership promises.

Most teens on the South Side of Chicago during this era are from working-class families and cannot afford many luxuries. For Tom Lanner, living with relatives, there are never any luxuries. Yet he remains, throughout the book, a solid friend, a "nice guy," and often serves as Eddie's conscience, especially in the case of Una. Tom's financial plight, which results in his leaving Bremmer for the local public high school, is perhaps Eddie's first taste of the injustice of the real world. As Eddie sees, just being a nice guy does not carry with it the weight to earn him the financial assistance to continue at Bremmer. Fortunately, Tom accepts his plight and remains who he is.

Who one hopes to become and what one hopes to do in life hits the seniors at Bremmer, as it does seniors in any school throughout the country. Eddie must plan for his future with the help of a guidance counselor who, like many readers have known, offers little in the way of guidance or counseling. Most accept the assessment and advice of guidance counselors, but a few rebel as Eddie attempts to do. Unfortunately, in this instance, the counselor is correct. Eddie is not college "material," given his high school record, and he will have to look elsewhere for life after high school. Fortunately, Eddie, like Tom, accepts his fate.



# Chapter 15, The Jolly Season

## Chapter 15, The Jolly Season Summary

As Eddie grows out of childhood, his fascination with Christmas wanes somewhat. Christmas day is jolly, but the day after always is a bleak letdown. Somehow all of the anticipation and the spirit of the season empties out by the 26th. Bremmer High School celebrates the seasons primarily with a glee club concert on the last day of school before the Christmas break. School is dismissed two hours early, so that preparations can be made for the annual basketball tournament Bremmer always hosts. Bremmer's basketball team is traditionally terrible, but the tumbling team, which performs at half time, is excellent and unique among sport teams at Catholic high schools in Chicago. Timmy Heidi is on the tumbling team and gives a stellar final performance as a senior, until his final stunt, which results in a broken leg. Obviously, his presence at the annual Christmas dance will be only a presence.

Eddie is in a "crummy" mood throughout December, because his on-again, off-again relationship with Una is in an "off" period. He asked her to the annual Christmas dance but assumes now that she will not be going with him. As well, she has just been released from the hospital, after an emergency appendectomy. Eddie has not spoken with her the entire month and only learns about the hospital stay by Tom Lanner, who is a good friend to them both. The sock hop after the basketball game will be Eddie's only opportunity to find a replacement date for the dance, just a few days away. Fortunately Monica Radil has broken up with her college boyfriend and agrees to be Eddie's date.

Christmas day is uneventful and almost boring except for the huge snowfall and shoveling that follows. Just as Eddie is warming up from his outdoor chore, Monica telephones to cancel their date the following evening, because she has reconciled with her college boyfriend. After sleeping on his problem, Eddie decides not to tell his family about the cancellation. He picks up his tux and corsage, dresses, and then must leave on foot, because he is supposed to be doubling, and the other boy is driving. He plans to spend two or three hours in and out of stores and then perhaps kill another hour or two in a diner someplace. He passes Tom Lanner's house and goes in to warm up a bit. There, he learns that Una is back in the hospital, having developed an infection from the former surgery.

Eddie boards a bus headed for Victoria Hospital. There, he locates Una, admits his date has dumped him, engages in a rather philosophical discussion of life and aging, and then turns on the radio so they can dance. The moment is interrupted by a phone call from Tom, and Eddie leaves, placing the corsage on Una's pillow on the way out.



## Chapter 15, The Jolly Season Analysis

Again, the reader confronts experiences to which he or she can probably relate—the breakup of a relationship and the broken date. Obviously, Eddie and Una have had a rocky relationship throughout high school. Here, in his senior year, Eddie is still seeing her. When one carefully reads the dialogue between them at the hospital, it appears that Una is one friend who has pushed Eddie to think beyond the typical teenage time frame of the next few weeks. Una has had a large impact on Eddie, for he continues to think of her, even as an adult. She is portrayed as much more mature than her peers, a thoughtful and introspective young lady who finds pleasure sitting with an elderly gentleman in the atrium and listening to his philosophy of life.

# Chapter 16, Final

## Chapter 16, Final Summary

Graduation day has arrived. As the speeches drone on, Eddie looks at his class ring and reflects upon his senior year of high school and the major events of that year. As the graduates are named, one by one, Eddie recalls what each of them ultimately become. They file across the stage, receiving their diplomas from and kissing the ring of the Bishop. Alone in his uncle's car, Eddie drives home to the family party awaiting. He makes the ritual detour by Una's house. She is in the back yard, and he drives on, having seen her for the last time ever.

## Chapter 16, Final Analysis

Eddie's cynicism is evident as he listens to the speeches of the valedictorian and two brothers. He sees graduation as a "McDonald's" event—"I'd like one principal, a valedictorian, small size, one bishop with a ring to kiss, and 368 seniors, easy on the tassels, to go," (p. 279). He is especially critical of Bishop Mandings who insists that even if one chooses to be a garbage man, he should make it his goal to be the best garbage man possible. "How many garbage men's rings had he kissed lately?" (p. 283), Eddie asks as he privately ridicules Mandings's attempt to insist that everyone is equal when clearly they are not. He recalls the parade of adults brought into school during career exploration times—lawyers, doctors, businessmen. "None of them picked up garbage for a living, although they were all quite good at delivering it," (p. 283). Nevertheless, Eddie completes one passage of life. He is older, wiser, more cynical to be sure, but somehow the reader is left with the notion that Eddie will move on to become productive, perhaps an agent of change within his community and his Church.



# Characters

## Eddie Ryan

Growing up Catholic on the South Side of Chicago, Eddie enters adolescence and high school with the typical issues of being a teenager, but the additional weight of being Catholic. He worries about his physical appearance, his changing voice, girls, and his lack of academic success. At the same time, he and his friends, a small group of unique individuals, make their way through high school, enduring the rigidity of the Brothers of the St. Bremmer Order and the lackluster lay teachers, all of whom insist upon strict obedience and unquestioning compliance. As Eddie proceeds through high school, the maturation process becomes noticeable. He learns to "play the game" at school and finds romance with Una, a relationship that does not ultimately last, but one which profoundly affects him. As well, he begins to reflect upon more significant issues, including politics, his Catholic faith and his future. Eddie develops a certain cynicism regarding his Church and Catholic education in general, and he criticizes the Church for being too tolerant of the injustices and inequities so prevalent in society. Eddie's story ends with his high school graduation, but the reader is certainly left with the belief that Eddie's life will be productive and ultimately satisfying for him.

## Tom Lanner

An easy-going friend of Eddie's, Tom develops Osgood-Schlatter's Disease at about the same time as Eddie. The two have grown up together in the same neighborhood, although in quite different circumstances. Tom lives with a financially strapped aunt, his mother having died and his father absent from his life. From the seventh grade forward, Tom holds part-time jobs in order to assist with expenses of the household. He is able to attend Bremmer High School only because an uncle is able to add to what Tom is able to save for tuition. He is a bright student who applies himself and is in the Engineering Program at Bremmer, second only to the Honors Program. Unfortunately, after two and a half years at Bremmer, Tom can no longer pay the tuition and is forced to enroll in the local public high school. He accepts his fate rather philosophically, although he is clearly unhappy to be leaving Bremmer. Tom and Eddie remain friends, as do Tom and Una, Eddie's most significant girlfriend, and, in fact, Tom does a good bit of counseling for both on their tumultuous relationship. Tom is a steady, all-around teen who is a friend to all and who has had to grow up a bit too quickly.

## Felix Lindor

Another friend of Eddie's from grammar school, Feli is the guy who always has a "dirty mind," who is "wild and crazy" and always willing to take risks. He is outgoing and gregarious and teaches his friends, while still in grammar school, how to roam aimlessly about town for hours and to avoid answering parents' probing questions about where



they go and with whom they cavort. Felix goes on to Bremmer High School with Eddie, and both are enrolled in the Academic Program, for average students. As a high schooler, Felix is primarily interested in girls and dates a wide variety, often reaching outside of his social and religious niche, if the girl is of appropriately loose morals. It is clear that Felix is not a serious student, and the reader can easily see him as a future successful salesman.

## **Timmy Heidi**

Timmy attends St. Bastion's grammar school with Eddie and is also attending Bremmer High School. Since he has the "nerve" to question the nuns throughout grammar school, they declare him stupid, punishing him with low grades. When he takes the special scholarship exam for high school, however, he achieves the highest score of the two hundred participants, and receives a full scholarship. The nuns at St. Bastion, of course, are in shock. Timmy is one of eleven children, his parents taking very seriously the notion of procreation. As well, Timmy's house has no radio or television, a condition brought about by his father, who feels they are signs of lack of intelligence. Unlike the other "nerds" in the Honors Program at Bremmer, Timmy is much more well-rounded, loving baseball and his small group of close friends, none of whom are in the honors program with him.

## **Brother Coratelli**

Brother Coratelli is Eddie's Latin teacher. He is so old, Eddie is convinced that Latin is his "native tongue." Since he is not a clean person, Brother Coratelli smells and is nicknamed "Sort-a-Smelli." When he attempts to justify the study of Latin to the class, Eddie makes an obnoxious comment, and is forever on Brother Coratelli's "black list." Eddie attempts to become "invisible" in Latin class and flunks most tests, fails for the year, and Brother Coratelli has the pleasure of Eddie's company for ten weeks of summer school.

## **Brother Well**

Perhaps the meanest of the teachers, Brother Well is at one time an amateur boxer before joining the order of St. Bremmer. He arrives at Bremmer with a reputation, having been transferred from another high school after having punched two students. No one gives Brother Well any difficulty.

## **Una**

Eddie meets Una during a spring rain when they both take cover under a custard stand awning. Their relationship blooms through the summer with long walks around the neighborhood, and, once Eddie is able to drive, real dates. Una is an attractive girl, active in a variety of extracurricular activities and able to carry on lengthy conversations about



actual issues. Eddie is clearly in love with Una, but their relationship is soured by arguments and frequent breakups. By the time Eddie graduates, he and Una are "off," and he never sees her again.

## **Ed Kascher**

Mr. Kascher is a world history teacher who replaces Mr. Blair, a teacher unable to maintain classroom control. The students are shocked to discover that this new teacher is anything but a pushover. While the faculty finds him inappropriate in dress and general demeanor, the students begin to appreciate Kascher (now nicknamed "Smooth Eddie") for his teaching strategies and his insistence that students learn facts and develop opinions based upon them. Eddie comes to realize that "Smooth Eddie was a damn good teacher...Today I realize that he was the only one," (p. 180).

## **Bippo**

An unlikely cross country runner, Bippo (George Gelley) is short and muscular. His mother deserts the family, and his father is an alcoholic tree trimmer. During an altercation with some football players, the football coach observes Bippo's capacity to run through anything and immediately recruits him. Bippo is the star of the Homecoming game, but his fame is short-lived when he punches the Homecoming Queen during her coronation.

## **Richard Bobbo**

Richard is one of the fat and ugly kids who is on the lowest rung of the social ladder at Bremmer. Finally angry enough about his treatment by others, Bobbo defies the star scholar-athlete, Bert Benson and manages further revenge in the cafeteria, ultimately causing Benton to receive detentions.

## **Brother Purity**

The principal at Bremmer, Brother Purity attempts to instill school spirit in all students, but is only moderately successful. He holds "spirit assemblies" throughout Eddie's years at Bremmer.





## Objects/Places

### St Bastion Grammar School

Elementary school on the South Side of Chicago where Eddie Ryan completes his first eight years of school

### Bremmer High School

Catholic high school run by the Brothers of St. Bremmer Order and where Eddie completes four years of high school

### Publics

Term referring to non-Catholic children who attend public schools

### Jug

Term for after-school detention

### Mixers

Friday night informal dances held in Church basements or school gyms.

### McCormack Place

Convention center in Chicago and site of numerous graduations, including Eddie's

### Victoria Hospital

Hospital in which Una is a patient for an appendectomy and for complications from that surgery

### Honors Program

Program of studies at Bremmer High School, designed for only the brightest students



## **Engineering Program**

Program of studies designed for college-bound students who are well above average but who do not have the top entrance exam scores

## **Academic Program**

Program of studies designed for the "average" Bremmer High School student and to which Eddie is assigned

## **Business Program**

Program of studies designed for the lowest on the academic ladder, preparing students for semi-skilled employment or the military

## **South Side Chicago**

A culturally cohesive area of the city of Chicago which, during the 1950s and 1960s, houses a large number of Catholic families



# Themes

## Cultural Cohesiveness

From the industrial revolution through the mid-1960s, the unity and perpetuation of culture was the task of a community, composed of families, churches and schools. Children grew up in a community and, more often than not, remained in that community as adults. Communities were formed along ethnic and religious lines, and the South Side Chicago community of Eddie Ryan's time was no different. Primarily Catholic, children attended their local parish grade schools, attended mass with their families every week, and, when the time came, entered one of several Catholic high schools. In this way, the children remained among their "own" kind, socialized with their own kind, married their own kind, and raised their own children as they were raised. This was Eddie Ryan's world, as he grew into adulthood, and, while it engendered criticism and some amount of cynicism, he nevertheless conformed. Eddie was part of a new generation, however, one which entered a more complex adult world, in which the black and white of simple traditional thought was giving way to civil rights, an unpopular war, women's liberation, and the crumbling of traditional values and institutions. Indeed, cultural cohesiveness was giving way to cultural diversity, and one can see its beginnings in young people such as Eddie, who began to question the infallibility of parents and Church teaching, the lack of minorities in their schools and communities, and the tolerance for gross inequality in the richest democracy on Earth.

## Coming of Age

The adolescent years comprise that period in life that is the transition from childhood to adulthood. They are, by their very nature, often painful and filled with ambivalence, as teens begin to ask important questions about themselves and their place in society. Seeking independence, adolescents begin to question the values, mores, and traditions of the status quo and yet look to that status quo for protection and security. In this sense, Eddie Ryan symbolizes every American adolescent. Growing up in a traditional Catholic household and educated in traditional Catholic schools by nuns and priests, he moves through his high school years questioning the value of a "one-sided" education which is both boring and irrelevant. He criticizes the Church that purports to follow the teachings of Christ and yet remains tolerant of injustice and inequity. He pokes fun at nuns and priests who demand that dancing couples remain a phone book apart, who measure skirt lengths, and who make rules about the proper length of kisses. Lost in the minutiae, Eddie's Church seems archaic and irrelevant to him. His "rebellion," however, remains internal. He is not the student who openly questions the priest in religion class; he is not one who demands better teaching from his instructors; he is not one who "acts out" his rebellion at home or at school. Like the majority of teens in his time, Eddie tolerates traditions and values which he believes to be outdated, assuming that he will be a part of changing them once he attains adulthood. His generation, in fact, is forced into adulthood rapidly, as the political and social upheavals of the 1960s demand.



## Catholic Conscience

Traditionally, the Catholic Church has sought to control its members with rigid and often tedious rules and regulations. Catholic children are subjected to religious indoctrination the moment they begin their educations, usually at their local parish elementary schools. Nuns are their first teachers, and religion class is a mandatory part of each day, accompanied by masses on a regular basis. The list of "don'ts" for Catholics is long, though it has shortened significantly in recent years. In the days of Eddie Ryan, however, guilt over sins committed was common. Sins included eating meat on Friday, skipping mass, wearing revealing clothing, dancing too close, "unclean" thoughts about the opposite sex, sex before marriage, and masturbation. Teens were taught to feel guilt about their sinful thoughts and actions, and most did, for this guilt had been cultivated since childhood. Absolution could only be obtained by regular trips to the confessional and by performing those actions assigned by the priest confessor. As an adult, recalling these teen years, Eddie seems to have shed his Catholic conscience somewhat, and the Church has relaxed its lists of "don'ts." It seems to Eddie that the guilt was not so much guilt as it was a fear of the horrors of Hell if one did not confess and receive absolution. Throughout the book, however, Eddie hints at his own thoughts about an appropriate "Catholic conscience." He wonders why the Church spent an inordinate amount of time promoting guilt for failure to follow all of its tedious rules and yet held no guilt about poverty and inequality, a far more serious issue to him.



# Style

## Point of View

A first person narrative is absolutely essential for this tale, and Eddie Ryan is the perfect narrator for the job. As a Catholic from a cohesive working-class community on the South Side of Chicago, Eddie is living the events of the late 1950s and early 1960s through the eyes of an adolescent who is not only experiencing the usual and natural pangs of being a teenager, but is "enduring" a Catholic high school education which often leaves him frustrated and almost angry. As if dealing with pimples, dandruff and body odor were not enough, Eddie has to struggle through Latin and religion classes, taught by boring Brothers of the St. Bremmer Order. Through all of this, it is absolutely critical that the reader has intimate insight into all of Eddie's thoughts, fears, anxieties, and pains, most of which he cannot reveal in conversation with others. Through his thoughts, the reader is able to experience Eddie's maturation over a four year period, his feelings about the inequities within both his school and within society as a whole, the hypocrisy he concludes exists within the Church, and yet his loyalty to his neighborhood, its inhabitants, and, ultimately, his Church is evident. Every teen has experienced the pain of losing the "first love," and Eddie is no different, revealing the emotions that accompany that experience. In this narrative, Eddie becomes almost any teenager growing up during a turbulent period both within the country and within his Church.

## Setting

The South Side of Chicago is an ethnically and racially mixed area today, as it was in the mid-twentieth century. Small neighborhoods were cohesive along ethnic and/or religious lines, and Eddie's neighborhood was typical. Within this sub-section of the South Side, families were working-class and Catholic, and they passed their culture on to their children, in order to maintain the cohesiveness of the neighborhood. Adults worked together, families belonged to the same parish, children attended the parish grammar school and went on to a high school close by, and both the child and adult sports teams were all composed of neighborhood residents. Eddie's world was, in fact, a network and a web, indeed, a cosmos, in which everyone knew or was related to everyone else. This work is by necessity set in this neighborhood of Eddie's, as well as within the walls of his high school, for these two environments are Eddie's entire world from the time of his birth until his high school graduation. The reader is left with the impression, as well, that, even beyond high school, Eddie may remain, along with many of his friends, in this same neighborhood, particularly if they move from graduation directly into the workforce. There are hints that the old cohesiveness may disintegrate as the years move forward, but Eddie is caught just on the cusp of this new generation that will look beyond the South Side for its future.



## Language and Meaning

Two factors of language are critical for the credibility of this work. First, Eddie is recalling his adolescence during the mid-twentieth century. Every teenage generation has its language oddities, and this generation was no exception. The terms "mixer," "sock hop," and "petting," for example, are unique to this era and are immersed throughout the narrative and the conversations. As well, this tale is about Catholicism at a time when the Church and its followers were both moving into a period of upheaval and unrest, questioning the traditional structures and dogma that had served the faithful for centuries. The terms "mortal" and "venial" sin, for example, demonstrate the detail with which the Church defined the hierarchy of bad thought or behavior. To further understand Catholicism, moreover, one must be introduced to retreats, the Sodality Society of Eddie's high school, confession, absolution, and the prayer methodologies practiced by faithful Catholics. A third factor of language is perhaps that of working class Americans. These were individuals who were high school graduates at best, and their language is appropriately simplistic. Eddie himself describes events and carries on conversations which are not particularly intellectual, for his story is not an intellectual one. The language, therefore, is completely appropriate for the time, for the characters, and for the Catholic Church.

## Structure

Author Powers is a master of moving back and forth through time, as he relates a generally chronological story. As the chapter titles reveal, Powers prefers to give the reader a series of vignettes from his adolescence, and each chapter can be read as a small gem in itself. The chapter title "Una," for example, tracks Eddie's stormy relationship with his first love throughout his four years of high school. Other chapters focus on individuals or events (for example, "Bippo," "Retreat"), and these are without chronological time frame. Overall, however, the reader is given the "whole ride" of Eddie's four years. The first chapter begins with his entry to high school life, and the final chapter treats his graduation from that same high school. In this respect, then, the work is chronological. Sandwiched between, however, are wonderful, humorous, tragic, and bittersweet experiences and a cast of characters that depicts a microcosm of human personalities, lending true universality to the work. The memoir can be seen, then, to be both a chronological depiction of the growth and development of an adolescent and a series of individual and unique recollections of a man growing up Catholic. The successful meshing of these two structures into a work that is both informative and entertaining is a testament to the author's skill.

## Quotes

The honors program contained the guys who had scored in the 99.999th percentile on their high school entrance examination, worked out calculus problems for their own amusement during lunch time, had asked Santa Claus for a chemistry set instead of a bicycle, and never did notice when weekends or puberty came around. (Chapter 2, p. 34)

When I was in first grade, my nun told our class that we should "enjoy" our grammar school years because, in no time at all, the years would be gone...The reason I don't fear hell today is because I know that eternity can't be as long as the eight years I spent in grammar school. (Chapter 2, p. 39)

By the time I had earned the five bucks, my enthusiasm was waning. When I dropped it into the mission can, I can honestly say that I did not feel the thrill of God's love, at least not five dollars' worth. (Chapter 2, p. 42)

Religion was another "unflunkable" subject at Bremmer. About the only way you could do it would be to come right out and claim that you hated God's guts. (Chapter 2, p. 45)

Having to go to summer school would also be a very humiliating experience. My neighbors, who would see me leaving the house every morning at seven o'clock, dressed so neatly that I had to be going to school, would finally have solid evidence for something they had long suspected: I was indeed a loser. (Chapter 2, p. 56)

Father Rasp spent many religion classes talking about the dangers of going steady...Like most authorities on teenagers, Father Rasp did not believe that "familiarity breeds contempt" but rather simply that "familiarity breeds." (Chapter 3, p. 72)

Mrs. Babkowski also felt that the world would soon end because of an overabundance of shopping centers. She reasoned that the earth would become so cluttered with them that there would be no room left to grow any food and most of us would starve to death as we wandered aimlessly around in some Sears, Roebuck. (Chapter 5, p. 93)

I think that you should feel something after seeing a movie: happy, sad, mad, something. The only emotion I felt after viewing the film was gypped. (Chapter 6, p. 115)

All cross-country runners have the same physical build; that is, almost none at all. When the typical cross-country team stands up at the starting line, it looks like a picket fence. (Chapter 7, p.133)

Growing older, much older, the valleys have gradually risen and the peaks have slowly dwindled as my existence has leveled out into one long straightaway...Occasionally, looking back, I can see that the highest peaks and lowest valleys belong to Una. (Chapter 8, p. 163)



That was Smooth Eddie. You could have a more meaningful class with him just standing by the window that you could get from other teachers knocking their brains out. (Chapter 9, p. 178)

The only possible way you could actually score with the average Catholic girl was if you had been dating her from the moment you were both still warm from the womb. And sometimes not even then. (Chapter 10, p. 184)

Brother Sofek was the first one to so graphically demonstrate to me that tactics of the Mafia and the Catholic Church were so alike: Step out of line with either one and you'd get burned. (Chapter 11, p. 203)





## Topics for Discussion

How much influence did Catholic dogma have on Eddie Ryan's life as an adolescent? Give specific examples from the work.

What are the benefits of "community cohesiveness"? What are the drawbacks?

There is a definite hierarchy within the student body at Bremmer High School. How does it compare to that within public schools today?

About what is Eddie Ryan cynical? Do you think his cynicism is justified? Why or why not?

Eddie spends a lot of time discussing teachers at Bremmer. How is Ed Kascher different?

There are a number of social and political comments spattered throughout the book. What are these and do they remain relevant today?

During graduation, Eddie comments on several of the students as they walk across the stage. What political and social comments is he making with these comments?