# What I Know Now Short Guide

## What I Know Now by Rodger Larson

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# Overview

What I Know Now is a novel about Dave Ryan, a fourteen-year-old boy who falls in love with a man who comes to his house to build a garden, and about the experience of growing up and learning about love and self-acceptance. It is a coming-of-age novel, and it details Dave's struggles during the summer of 1957 to understand his sexual and emotional self. Dave is probably gay, though Larson never says that directly, but rather makes the issue of coming out secondary to the issue of emotional growth and self-awakening. At the beginning of the summer Dave feels alienated and un loved by his father, and after the separation of his parents, he must deal with leaving his father and his brother Brad back at their ranch while he and his mother try to build a new life. By the end of the summer, Dave is well on his way to maturity and has learned invaluable lessons about love. Larson introduces Gene Tole, the gardener, on the first page of the prologue, making it clear that Tole is the impetus for Dave's growth.

Dave's relationship with Gene and the growing love he feels for him launches the boy on his journey to self-discovery. Dave narrates the story looking back on the summer and reliving the events that molded his perspective and helped define the person he hopes to become.

# About the Author

Rodger Larson grew up on a ranch in the Central Valley of California, and got material from those childhood years on the ranch to use in What I Know Now. Larson grew up and got married, but then came out as a gay man in 1979 at the age of 38, and subsequently got divorced and lost custody of his child. Though Larson had always idealized writers and loved to read, the emotional turmoil he experienced during this difficult time led him to begin writing himself. He received his B.A. in Humanities from Evergreen State College, and his M.A. in Creative Writing from Antioch University. He then continued to study writing, both by taking formal classes and by studying privately with writers.

Larson has taught at the Portland State University School of Extended studies, the Portland Community College at the Columbia River Correctional Institution, and he has conducted fiction workshops in his home. He is also a trained landscape architect, but he continues to teach, and currently teaches high school English parttime at the Metropolitan Learning Center in Portland, Oregon. Larson began writing What I Know Now as a short story, then eventually expanded it to a novel. This is his first and only novel to date.

# Setting

The novel is set in Stockton, California, a rural town just outside San Francisco, in the summer of 1957. Dave's parents have just separated, and he and his mother have moved back to Home Place, his mother's childhood home. When they first move to Home Place, the house and the grounds are in disrepair. But together Gene Tole, a horticulturist, and Dave turn the tangle of weeds into a garden and transform Home Place from its dilapidated state into a place of beauty. Much of the action centers around the garden, where plants grow and mature.

Larson uses the transformation of the setting as a metaphor for the changes that occur within Dave's inner self. He uses the symbolism of the garden to advance the theme of maturation and growth. Gene teaches Dave how to garden, how to help things grow, and how to nurture and care for them as they do. It is this nurturing, of garden and self, that helps Dave feel at home—at home both in his new physical location and at home with his emotional self. The name Home Place implies a place of nurturing, and it is there where Gene Tole nurtures both the plants and Dave's soul. When Dave does venture away from Home Place, in one instance to San Francisco with Gene, he expands his horizons and learns to feel comfortable with new experiences. The confusion of the city, the newness of Dave's experiences there, and the unfamiliarity of the restaurants and places he visits highlight Dave's naivete.

They also highlight the security and comfort Dave comes to feel at Home Place, and in the garden, where Dave's true growth takes place.

# Social Sensitivity

All teenagers struggle with issues of selfacceptance, and age fourteen generally marks a turning point in our lives, a point where soaring hormones and confusing emotions mold our perceptions of self. It is a time when the experiences we have and the people we encounter can help us understand those soaring hormones and decipher those confusing feelings. Larson's tale of Dave's longings illustrates the typical teen identity struggle, but adds a sexual identity struggle to further the dilemma.

For many teens, coming to terms with homosexuality often makes self-love and selfacceptance harder to achieve. This was particularly true in 1957, when homosexual love was rarely discussed. Larson deals with Dave's struggle and his adolescent emotions in a sensitive manner. He skirts the issue of homosexuality, but makes it clear that Dave has a crush on Gene Tole.

All teenagers understand crushes, and Larson uses kind, sympathetic characters to convey the message that such crushes are normal and can be enlightening experiences.

He fuels the fire for discussions about love, gender identity, and manhood.

Gay rights issues in the news today capture the attention of both gay and straight teens, and Larson's characters help these teens see past sexual stereotypes and reassess pre-formed notions of manhood. In today's world many young men still feel pressure to act "macho," and they fear showing their nurturing side. They may consider a nurturing nature a "feminine" trait and pronounce it a sign of weakness. Larson shows, however, that Gene's loving and nurturing nature is his true strength. He makes us realize that Dave will eventually understand that his longings for Gene are not simply for sex, but for love, and that he will eventually become a "strong" enough "man" to show love and to receive it. Dave's naivete about sex and about his longings allow Gene to reveal to him the true nature of love. Larson seems to be telling us that though sex may follow at some point and in some relationships, love must always come first.

Larson fully develops Dave and Gene's characters and the relationship they share, but he fails to develop the mother's character or reveal too much about how she relates to her son. For this reason, we cannot determine for sure if she knows of Dave's sexual confusion. But she is not afraid of letting Gene spend time with Dave, even though she knows that Gene is gay. This brings to surface the issue of gays serving as role models for young people. Larson makes it clear that Dave's mother trusts Gene Tole to give her son the loving guidance he needs. But does she realize how instrumental he is in helping her son recognize the true definition of manhood? The question of whether gay men should serve as role models pops up often in society today. Some adults clearly wish to prevent gays from becoming school teachers, from leading youth groups, or from forming close friendships with their children. But Dave's mother allows Gene to develop a bond with her son and to teach him how to be sensitive, loving, moral, and

kind. Larson seems to be saying that nothing but good can come out of a relationship like that.

# Literary Qualities

What I Know Now is a coming-of-age novel, and Larson opens a window into Dave's mind by describing his daydreams and fantasies. Like many adolescent boys, Dave is preoccupied with his fantasies. He uses them for comfort, to escape from the pressures he feels in his changing world. By revealing Dave's private thoughts, Larson succeeds in creating a sympathetic character. He makes us see that what Dave feels is a natural adolescent desire for love and acceptance, and he makes us understand that, with the proper guidance, Dave will become sensitive and caring enough to give love and acceptance in return.

Larson uses Dave's fantasies in part to highlight the mixture of curiosity and confusion he feels about sex. He conveys these feelings using sexual props and sexual imagery as well. Dave is reading Madame Bovary at the beginning of the novel, for instance, hoping to find steamy passages that may provide answers to some of his questions.

He then buys another book at the bookstore he visits with Gene the day they spend in San Francisco, again hoping to find answers. Everything reminds Dave of sex.

Driving with Gene, Dave recognizes sexual images in the landscape. He thinks the hills look like breasts, and that they come together "like the place where a woman's legs come together." He views suggestive photographs on display in San Francisco, and is amazed that anyone would pose for them. Dave becomes enticed with the realization that sex exists all around him, and we get the message that though Dave would be captivated by sex at this stage of his life anyway, his growing bond with Gene intensifies the allure.

Dave may be captivated by sexual images, but what his subconscious mind does with his fantasies confuse him. He does not understand sex apart from love and mar riage to a woman, and he has never imagined sex with a man. Yet once he meets Gene Tole, men increasingly enter his daydreams. Many times, Dave begins a heterosexual fantasy, but homosexual thoughts invade it. Early on in the novel, he daydreams about naked or half-naked women serving him on a desert island, but later in the novel naked men replace the women in a similar fantasy. Gene enters his fantasies often, but only in a vague way, and Dave has a hard time understanding exactly what Gene is doing there or why he appeared. It is unclear whether Dave's preoccupation with Gene stimulates these fantasies, or whether his preoccupation with sex naturally leads to thoughts of this important person in his life.

As we learn to understand Dave, we begin to see where his sexual confusion originated. Larson reveals important childhood experiences in Dave's life by flashing back to earlier times. By relating memories such as imitating "the female technique" with his brother Brad, and engaging in conversations with his brother Brad about sex, Larson drops hints that Dave experienced unrealized homosexual feelings early in life. By relating the two incidents when Dave's father held him then rejected him, Larson unearths the emotional starvation Dave felt by longing for love from a man who could

never give love in return. Dave narrates the story when he has had time to reflect on the events of the past months, determine their connection to emotions he experienced in childhood, and consider the influence Gene Tole has had on his life. The memories and fantasies we read about are therefore those that Dave wants us to know, those that he believes helped characterize his maturation process.

What could be a more fitting symbol for the maturation process than the growth of a garden? And what could be a more fitting symbol for a person who nurtures a young man through the maturation process than a horticulturist? Dave and his mother come to Home Place to build a new life, to plant the seeds of love and to tend them carefully to ensure that they grow and flourish. Dave, in adolescence, is learning to create a mature adult from a confused child, much like a horticulturist creates a garden from weeds.

Larson emphasizes the importance of Gene teaching the horticulture trade to Dave.

"Sometimes when you build a garden," Gene said, "you build a gardener too, someone to care for the garden when it's done."

If the garden represents Dave's developing emotions, then Dave must become his own gardener. Gene, by teaching Dave to be that gardener, teaches him to become the caretaker of his own life.

Dave, in remembering Gene's statement about building a gardener, realizes that "if there was a ceremony when we began building the garden, that was it." This "ceremony" is clearly a coming of age ceremony, the rite of passage that launches Dave on the path to becoming an mature and confident adult. "Laying out the garden became a dance." Larson says, much like a dance of in some tribal puberty rite. When Dave, his mother, and Gene are having champagne, they toast the garden. "May it flourish and prosper," his mother says, and Gene adds "May we all flourish and prosper." With the help of Gene, Dave did.

Larson continues the garden metaphor throughout the novel to help readers understand Dave's growth process and the past events that influenced it. When Gene and Dave plant the dove tree in Brad's honor and Gene's father destroys it, Gene says of the tree: There is a school of thought that it's better for a tree to be cut off like this while it's young. The theory is that the roots grow stronger. Some believe that then the tree puts out more vigorous growth, stronger branches, makes a better tree in the long run. I've never been from that school of thought, though, until now.

Like the dove tree, Dave was cut off from love and nurturing early on and was left to gain strength on his own. Because we recognize the connection Larson draws between the tree and Dave, we know the tree will grow and thrive. We feel certain that Dave's father did not destroy the dove tree at all, but merely hindered its progress. We also feel certain that, because of Gene, Dave has learned to become a confident enough "gardener" to nurture the tree back to health.

# Themes and Characters

The first theme Larson advances in What I Know Now is that of change and the confusion it often causes. The novel begins during a summer of change, with Dave and his mother leaving their ranch and their life with Dave's cold and abusive father and moving to Home Place, where they begin to build a new life. Dave's physical circumstances are changing, but his emotions are changing too; they are in a tangle, much like the weeds he and his mother find when they arrive at their new home. Dave feels confused and alone, and he longs to make sense of the world around him. He struggles that summer with his sexuality, but more significantly with his sense of self worth and the feelings of failure he has over his family's breakup. Larson reveals in the prologue that by the end of the summer, Dave has sorted out many of his confusing feelings. He also reveals that Gene Tole, the gardener, plays an instrumental role in Dave's growth.

By making Dave the narrator, Larson delves deep into the boy's character. We come to know Dave early on in the novel.

We understand his confusion, both about his changing circumstances and about his changing self. At fourteen, Dave is curious about sex. He masturbates, he fantasizes, and he reads books such as Madame Bovary, which he hopes will provide answers to his many questions. Larson helps us realize that Dave's longings are not unique to homosexual teens; instead, they are the longings every adolescent has to feel loved and accepted, and the longings that every child of divorce feels when he suddenly alienated from one parent. Dave is stuck between childhood and adulthood, and he is having a hard time sorting out life's complexities and understanding unfamiliar desires. He lives with his mother, yet he needs a male role model.

Everything changes for Dave when Gene Tole enters his life. Gene Tole works at Central Valley Nursery as a horticulturist, and he comes to Home Place at the beginning of the summer to build a garden for Dave and his mother. Dave is attracted to Gene the first time he meets him. He notices his good looks, his personable demeanor, and his sensitivity. He wants to spend time with Gene, and he feels elated when Gene chooses to spend time with him. At this point in the novel, Dave's feelings for Gene seem consistent with those of any young boy looking for heroes in his life. But Larson makes it clear that Dave's feelings for Gene reach a different level. This adds an additional layer of confusion to the boy's life, a layer that perhaps only gay teens can truly understand. But any teen, gay or straight, can relate to Dave's need to develop a loving bond with an adult male. Larson uses his prologue to reveal Dave's perception of the influence Gene Tole had on his life. As narrator, Dave says that the most important thing about that summer was that he fell in love with Gene Tole. This leads us to believe right away that the book probably centers on Dave's coming out, or at least on his own realization of his homosexuality, and suggests that this is a novel about sexual awakening. But, by delicately portraying both Dave and Gene as loving, sensitive people and intentionally downplaying the issue of homosexuality, Larson makes his primary theme that of

emotional awakening. We know that Gene Tole is gay, but we feel that fact has little to do with the sensitive, loving, person that Dave so admires.

The fact that Gene is gay is lost on Dave, and even at the end of the summer, when the novel ends, Dave cannot precisely define homosexuality. Dave's mother hints of Gene's homosexuality early on by telling Dave that Gene is not the kind of man who would ever be interested in her, and that Dave will understand that when he is older.

Dave does not know what she means by that, but he does know that Gene is the kind of man he himself wants to become. As we learn more about Gene's character, we understand that Dave's desire to be a man like Gene has very little to do with sexuality.

Gene becomes, for Dave, the nurturing father figure he so desperately needs, and Gene teaches him lessons about being a man that his own father can never teach him. Gene gives Dave the emotional tools he needs to become a kind and sensitive man. Literally and figuratively, he plants seeds and nurtures them to maturity.

Gene treats Dave as an equal from the minute he meets him. This man shows Dave respect that his father never showed him.

Dave is still very much a child at fourteen, naive and underdeveloped, with no hair on his face and chest. He is a typical adolescent; self-absorbed, preoccupied with his daydreams, and often sad for no reason.

But when Dave meets Gene, he feels grown up and important for the first time in his life. He feels cared for, and he knows that his company is enjoyed. Gene tells Dave that he likes working with him, that he likes being his friend, and even that he reminds Gene of himself when he was young. Dave feels wonderful when Gene says these things, and this makes us realize that this is the relationship that will mold Dave's perceptions of self.

Dave and Gene begin working on their garden together, and their relationship quickly becomes one of mentor-protege.

Larson develops this relationship to depict Gene as a role-model, and we realize that any sexual feelings Dave has for Gene develop easily as a natural expression of adolescent love. We may begin to think that perhaps Dave is not homosexual at all, but simply attracted to the tenderness Dave so desperately wants to see in men. But the search for tenderness is exactly what Larson intends to describe. Dave feels confused about his feelings for Gene, but that is typical of adolescent crushes, and often times, those attractions do lead to feelings of sexual desire. Though Larson downplays the sexual aspect of Dave's longings, he does drop subtle hints of Dave's physical attraction to Gene. Dave is very aware of Gene's body and movements; Dave notices Gene's "powerful hands," his shoulders, and the way his thumbs work back and forth when he removes a cork from a champagne bottle. He notices the way the tractor vibrates him, and he notices the smell of Gene's aftershave, "sweet and musky .. .

not a smell I'd noticed on other men." Dave obsesses on Gene, and on Gene's looks, and he even wants to look like him. Dave knows that he admires Gene, but he eventually comes to realize that he loves him. Larson never gives us the idea that this love is inappropriate, but only confusing for Dave.

Dave does feel guilty about the love he feels for Gene Tole, but his guilt has nothing to do with his sexual feelings, but with the fact that Dave feels he wants to substitute Gene for his own father. Dave thinks about his father often, and his memories of rare tender moments they shared take on added significance when Gene enters his thoughts and replaces his father in his fantasies. Dave remembers, for instance, sleeping with his father when his father was naked, and when he recalls the incident, he wishes that Gene was his father. He remembers his dad's arms around him, and the feeling of his dad's body next to his. It is unclear whether anything sexual happened between Dave and his father that night, but it seems possible that the father is himself struggling with latent homosexual feelings.

By injecting Gene into those memories, Larson reveals that Dave wants that kind of closeness with Gene, and he is beginning to realize that, unlike his father, a man like Gene is capable of experiencing such closeness without being threatened by it.

The sexual longings Dave feels for Gene are merely subconscious at this point, but as Dave spends more time with Gene and injects him into his thoughts and fantasies more often, he learns to understand the kind of closeness he desires to have with this new man in his life. Dave begins to notice blatant differences between Gene and his father. Gene has male friends, and Dave's father does not. Dave goes on a day trip with Gene and meets some of his friends, and he sees Gene hug one of them—the first time he ever witnessed two men showing affection toward one another. Dave's father makes him feel unimportant and Gene makes him feel important, yet both of them create feelings of love mixed with longing.

Gene, however, is able to satisfy those longings to a large extent. He is interested in Dave's life and his stories. He cares about Dave's feelings. Dave loves Gene for making it known that the kind of closeness he so desperately desires is entirely possible.

This release of emotion becomes a central theme of the novel, as Dave learns what it is like to feel close to another man. Dave still has no understanding of homosexuality, so he never consciously envisions Gene in a sexual context. Dave is at a critical point in his life, and Gene guides him down the path to emotional, rather than sexual, fulfillment. We come to believe that Dave will eventually learn that sexual fulfillment comes from a loving and emotional connection. What Dave learns from his father, however, is that sex has very little to do with love or emotional connection. At the time of his parents' separation, Dave learns that his father got a young neighbor girl pregnant. Later, when Dave returns to the ranch with his brother Brad, Brad tells him that his father is "fucking" a girl named Violet. Dave realizes that "fucking" has little to do with making love. But

Dave learns other harsh facts about his father that day at the ranch, which further contrast with the qualities he so admires in Gene.

Dave witnesses his father both verbally and physically abusing Brad. He sees his father push Brad around and berate him for getting a lousy haircut and for borrowing money from his mother. This is new insight into the father's character at this point.

Larson mentions that this man pushed Dave's mother before she left, and therefore had a tendency toward violent behavior, but not until this point does he reveal how mean-spirited he actually was. When Dave lived with his father, he had no hope of learning that a loving relationship with a man could be possible.

Dave's father is unable to show love; instead, he releases strong emotions as anger. Dave remembers how his father became angry after having slept in the same bed with Dave and after having held him and hugged him. Yet he witnesses how comfortable Gene Tole feels with physical affection. The contrast between Dave's father and Gene Tole intensifies later in the novel when Dave's brother Brad leaves for the Marine Corps and Gene and Dave plant a dove tree for his mother in Brad's honor.

Gene says that "even though Brad is not here anymore, we can watch the tree grow and we can nourish the tree and hope, imagine, that Brad is healthy and growing too, nourished wherever he may be." Gene's care of the tree and of the garden in general reveals his ability to give and receive loving care. When Dave's father comes to Home Place and sees the dove tree, he grabs the tree, snaps the head off of it, and drops it on the ground. He pronounces Gene's reason for planting the tree "a bunch of shit."

This incident leads to a fight between Dave's father and Gene. The father is angry at having lost Brad, and he is hostile to Dave during the visit; he calls him "houseboy," accuses him of being unable to help, and fires off a string of obscenities.

After he destroys the dove tree, he tries to take Dave back with him to help on the ranch even though he considers Dave to be useless. But Gene, in his quiet, calm manner, insists that Dave remain with his mother.

The father picks a fight with Gene, who grabs Dave's father and bangs his head against the tank house. (He does this away from Dave, rather than right in front of him, and the fact that Dave mentions this reveals that he considers this a show of respect.)

The mother stops the fight with a hose, and orders her husband to leave. Dave's father clearly loses the fight—and is shaken by his loss. Dave offers his father a towel, and he accepts it. He even says "thanks," which shocks Dave. His father has tears in his eyes at this point, but he cannot release them. He tries to touch Dave's arm, but is unable to do that and hits the steering wheel instead.

When Dave apologizes to Gene for his father's behavior, Gene gives Dave the kind of response he needs to hear. "You're not responsible for your dad, how he behaves," he said. "You treated him well though....

Maybe you can't be all that proud of him, but you can be proud of yourself, how you behaved. More important, I'd say, to be proud of how you behaved. Your dad can take care of himself."

The fight between Dave's father and Gene marks a turning point in the novel. The two male role models in Dave's life are pitted against each other, and Gene emerges as the winner. At this point Dave understands the kind of man he wants to become, and he understands that he can be proud of being sensitive and nurturing. He is learning that sensitivity and affection do not interfere with manhood at all, but rather highlight its strength. After the fight, Dave realizes that the fact that his father cannot express love spells weakness.

After this incident occurs, Dave gains more of a sense of self. It is because of this, perhaps, that Larson feels freer at this point to bring the sexual aspect of Dave's love for Gene into closer focus. Gene and Dave go skinny dipping together in the irrigation ditch, and this stimulates Dave's longings for Gene. Dave's naivete does not permit him to recognize these longings as sexual, but simply as warm, loving feelings. But this translation of longing appears to be what Gene is "teaching" Dave all along.

Swimming in the irrigation ditch, Gene is comfortable with his nakedness and comfortable with being close to Dave. Dave is uncomfortable with his nakedness at first, but then he relaxes, following Gene's lead.

The two swing together on a rope, their bodies pressed together, and Dave feels warm and wonderful and loved. Sex still exists under the surface, in Dave's subconscious mind, but Larson makes it clear that what Dave feels is a natural result of his learning to understand the depth of a loving relationship. He loves Gene, he admires him, and he wants to be physically close to him.

Nothing sexual happens the day Dave and Gene swim in the irrigation ditch, though Dave realizes that he has longings he cannot define. There is still no indication that Dave realizes that Gene is gay, or that he understands what gay means. But in the last few chapters, he begins to understand a little more. Dave goes to the symphony with his mother and sees Gene and his friends there, singing in the choir. He is surprised to learn that Gene sings and surprised to see Gene at the symphony at all.

When Dave mentions his surprise to Gene, Gene replies with, "Did it ever occur to you that there's a lot of things you don't know about me?" Dave's curiosity about this reply leads him to watch Gene more closely and try to identify what he cannot define.

Once again, at the symphony, Dave witnesses the physical closeness Gene shares with his friends. He sees how comfortable Gene feels with this closeness, and with himself and his life. Dave is far on the road to self acceptance by this point, that he knows that he wants his life to be like Gene's. He also knows that Gene taught him that this is possible, and he wants Gene to stay in his life and teach him more.

By the end of the summer, however, Gene must leave Dave's life and Stockton to work in the Botanical Gardens at Berkeley.

Dave rides his bike over to Gene's house to talk to him one more time, and to ask him to help him understand his feelings. When Dave gets to Gene's house, he sees candlelight, and he looks in the window and sees that Gene is having a going away party with his male friends. Once again, he witnesses their affection, but this time he also witnesses Gene dancing with another man and then kissing him. Dave becomes quite upset by this, to the point of feeling breathless and faint. Larson adroitly describes Dave's panicked reaction. He cries and questions his mother as to what he saw, but she can only say that "people's lives are sometimes difficult." By this time, however, Dave knows that Gene's life is not difficult, not nearly as difficult as his father's. His father, by holding his love inside, struggles more, feels more pain, and causes pain to those around him.

Dave spends the night awake, thinking.

He realizes that he loves Gene Tole, but he cannot quite figure love out. He decides to go see Gene in the morning, and he decides that he will keep him in his life and visit him at Berkeley. Dave does not understand yet why he loves Gene Tole or how he loves him, but he knows that the love he has feels natural and comfortable—as natural and comfortable as Gene feels with himself and with the affection he shares with his male friends. We know now that Dave is probably gay, but we get the feeling that whether he is or not has little to do with his selfacceptance. Larson's sensitive treatment of Dave's love for Gene Tole makes sexual orientation a non-issue. Dave says in the last line that he feels confident that he would soon "figure love out and .. . live by the kind of love that [is] right for me." By the end of the novel, we as readers know that whatever conclusions Dave reaches about his sexuality, he now has the emotional tools he needs to feel good about himself and to become the kind, nurturing person he wants to be.

# Topics for Discussion

1. What do you think first attracts Dave to Gene Tole?

2. How do Dave's feelings about his parents' separation affect the perceptions he has of Gene?

3. What affect do you think Dave's relationship with his father had on his identity struggle?

4. If Dave was living with his father and his father hired Gene do build a garden, do you Dave would still have developed a bond with Gene? Why or why not?

5. Why do you suppose Dave's father is so shaken after his fight with Gene Tole? What does this have to do with his perception of his own manhood?

6. Explain why you think Larson downplays Gene's homosexuality.

7. How do you think Dave would perceive himself if he only had role models like his father in his life?

8. Larson neglects to give Dave's parents names. Why do you suppose he did this?

9. What purpose, if any, does Dave's friend Parkie serve in the novel?

10. Larson uses the symbolism of the butterflies in the novel, again as a metaphor for transformation. But he also uses "mariposa," the Spanish name for butterfly, in another context. Can you explain this other context?

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Dave is naive, by today's standards, for a fourteen-year old boy. Most fourteen year olds today have at least some understanding of homosexuality, but Dave does not understand sex at all. He does not understand suicide either. It is clear that Dave leads a sheltered life when we learn that he has never had pizza, and in fact, never visited the city or ventured beyond his rural community. Do you find it odd that Dave, at fourteen, is so naive about life in general? Remember this is 1957. Discuss how Dave's struggle to understand his emotions would be different today.

2. Compare and contrast Dave's father's ideas of manhood with Gene Tole's ideas of manhood. Think about how each of them expresses their emotions, and discuss how this affects their selfconfidence and self-acceptance.

3. Discuss how Gene Tole serves as a role model for Dave. Why do you suppose that some people feel that gay men should not serve as role models for teens? Write a persuasive paper that reveals your opinions on this issue.

4. Dave's need for affection from an adult male led him to adore Gene Tole. Do you think that his need also caused him to confuse his feelings for Gene? Some people believe that homosexuality is learned rather than innate. Use Dave's love for Gene to write a persuasive paper that explains whether or not you believe homosexuality is environmentally influenced.

5. Discuss the theme of creation versus destruction that runs through the novel. Think about the differences between Dave's father and Gene and how their actions affect Dave's development.

6. Larson clearly contrasts acceptable male relationships with unacceptable ones. Dave's relationship with Gene is loving and nurturing and Dave's relationship with his father is unemotional and tense. What is Larson trying to say about how society should view homosexual love?

7. Consider how you perceive Brad as an adult and Dave as an adult. What kind of people will they ultimately become?

Compare and contrast these two brothers as adult men, and discuss why you believe they end up the way you think they did.

8. Compare the symbolism of the garden in What I Know Now to the garden in Frances Hodgson Burnett's classic book, The Secret Garden. Discuss the theme of transformation in each of these tales.

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# Related Titles/Adaptations

Edited by Marion Dane Bauer, Am I Blue?: Coming Out from the Silence is an awardwinning collection of sixteen short stories about homosexuality, love, coming of age, and self-discovery, written by well-known young adult novelists. Similar themes of burgeoning sexuality and forbidden love are explored in The Man Without a Face, written by Isabelle Holland and Asabelle Holland. This coming-of-age story focuses on a fourteen-year-old boy's relationship with an adult male he comes to love as both a mentor and a man. The book was adapted for a film starring Mel Gibson, released by Warner Brothers in 1993.

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