

The Normals

By David Gilbert

Reading Group Guide

The discussion questions that follow are designed to enhance your group's conversation about David Gilbert's *The Normals*, a dazzling novel that fuses media frenzy, medical meddling, and pre-millennial tedium, through the eyes of the hapless but astute slacker Billy Schine.

About this book

Twenty-eight-year-old Billy Schine is ready for something – anything – to happen in his life. Since graduating from Harvard, he has coasted through tedious temp jobs, cramped apartments, and apathetic lovers. So when he receives a letter from a collection agency demanding a return on his student loans – as well as phone calls suggesting brain extraction as an alternative to payment – Billy flees to upstate New York, into the care of Hargrove Anderson Medical. He joins a study testing the adverse effects of a new schizophrenia medication on “normals” – a motley group of paid volunteers who turn out to be anything but ordinary.

Quickly settling into a routine of pill-swallowing, blood-letting, and obsessing (over the only woman in the study group), Billy is content to sit back and watch the world go by on television. The media frenzy *du jour* concerns the brain image scan of an ordinary American man, whose cancerous brain matter resembles the Shroud of Turin. Meanwhile, the normals congregate to share sobering tales of previous medical studies, and to compare the side effects they might be experiencing. Billy, feeling disappointingly healthy, is jolted from the bland comforts of the study by his father, who wants Billy to help him and Billy's mother commit suicide on their wedding anniversary, the day after the study ends. Billy's only escape, it seems, is another medical study, but the side effects of this clandestine experiment may include death.

The Normals tackles the quintessential twenty-something question, “What should I do with my life?” while tearing through multiple levels of reality – from surreal newscasts to bad acting to injurious thoughts – and attaining insight into the simple grace of empathy.

For discussion

1. The epigraph of *The Normals* is taken from T.S. Eliot's “The Naming of the Cats,” one of the poems that inspired Andrew Lloyd Weber's musical *Cats*. What is the tone of the epigraph – playful, existential, or both? How does it relate to Billy's state of mind during his medical trials?
2. Why does Gilbert set *The Normals* in August 1999? Is pre-millennium tension palpable in the novel? If New York is “the place to be... the crossroads of the world... where the ball will drop and the blast wave will begin” (35), then why is Billy fleeing the city?
3. Review Billy's recurring dream on page 98, in which he recalls “being spectacularly entertained and feeling terribly alone.” How is this dream a harbinger of the experience

Billy is about to have at Hargrove Anderson? Why does the mood of the dream remain the same while the content on the movie screen changes?

4. Names figure prominently in *The Normals*, from Billy's disappointment in his youthful nickname, to the literal meanings of names (such as "flowery" for Florence and "helmet" for William), to the tragic absurdity of Do Rami's nickname. Do names, nicknames, and their meanings define Billy, Do, and the other characters of the novel? Or is Billy just engaging in wordplay?

5. How does Gretchen's "cold... little history project" (312) – sleeping with the other normals in the group – relate to her obsession with the Weather Channel, as described on page 144? Is she creating a natural disaster in her personal life, as Billy seems to feel, or is there some merit in her quest for remembrance?

6. Billy's fellow normals share incredible stories, such as Frank Gershin's intentional bullet wounds (220-223), Herb Colch and the "cock cold" (122), and Philip Crouse's curative black dot (122-126). How does the news that Billy's fellow test subjects might be actors impact his regard for them? How does the reader's perception of the group change?

7. Consider the SHAME animal liberation scene (321-326) that Billy and Gretchen watch from the window. Is this chaotic scene an allegory for the nature of society? Billy later learns that his mother died the same night as the SHAME event. What is the significance of this correlation?

8. When asked why he wants to participate in Dr. Honeysack's cryopreservation experiment, Billy replies, "Because it's something" (349). Is this a sufficient response for the reader? Why is Billy unable to give a more specific answer?

9. Billy hears songs from musicals embedded within white noise: "Oklahoma" in an elevator's hum (205), "Summer Nights" from *Grease* in Dr. Marx's cryogenic machine (351). Why do musicals figure so prominently in the novel, from the *Cats*-related epigraph to the *Carousel* tune on the last page? How do Billy's aural hallucinations relate to the commotion over Chuck Savitch's MRI?

10. What role does violence play in the novel? How does Billy react to the threatened violence of Polsheck of Ragnar & Sons? What effect does Do's self-inflicted violence have upon Billy? On Lannigan? On the normals group as a whole? Is this effect greater or lesser than one would expect from such a grisly act?

11. Gilbert creates a vivid world of characters surrounding Billy – from the study coordinator Carol Longley, "a generation removed from the family orchard, picking Post-its instead of produce" (61), to the "miserable from all angles" (45) Rodney Letts. Choose another character from *The Normals* and discuss how Gilbert executes a succinct, round characterization.

12. While watching the Muscular Dystrophy Telethon, Billy thinks of Chuck Savitch, who was deemed "not, as once thought, a victim soul but a sympathetic sufferer, which is a rung lower on the saint ladder" (365). Does Jerry Lewis's performance in the telethon

have more in common with Savitch's sympathetic suffering, or Lannigan's acting, in which "Even his snot seems poignant" (169)? What does Billy learn about sympathy while watching the telethon with his father?

13. Consider the theme of fatherhood in the novel. How do Dr. Marx and Ragnar each become father figures to Billy? What is Ragnar's role as a father in his own family, and in his company Ragnar & Sons? Why does Billy sign the hospital's settlement with Abe, instead of negotiating for more money with Ragnar? What does this act suggest about the future of Billy and Abe's relationship?

14. Discuss the significance of the Oxford Dictionary of Quotations, the only book Billy takes to Hargrove Anderson Medical. Why must the dictionary be lost, "stored away somewhere with his personal effects" (366), in order for Billy to connect emotionally with Abe?

15. Laura Miller of *The New York Times* observes, "Billy is real: a living, breathing, vexing (and entirely believable) human being" (*The New York Times Book Review* 10/17/04). Do you agree with Miller, that Billy is an authentic voice? How reliable a narrator is Billy? Can we trust his perceptions of himself and his surroundings? What would this novel be like if it were written in the third person, or from multiple perspectives?

Suggested reading

Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*; Sam Lipsyte, *Subject Steve* and *Home Land*; Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*; Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days*; Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*; Don DeLillo, *White Noise*; Zadie Smith, *The Autograph Man*; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*; Haruki Murakami, *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*; James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*; David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*.

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