



Reader's Guide

from David Phillip Mullins
author of *Greetings from Below*

Author Asks:

1. At times, Nick Danze can be both selfish and morally irresponsible. My desire was to create a character who is objectionable but--because he is unable to control his "fixations" and constantly chastises himself for his infidelities--ultimately likable. Did you find yourself drawn to Nick or repelled by him? Were you able to sympathize with him at all?
2. Each of the stories in *Greetings from Below* features the same protagonist and, with a few exceptions, supporting characters. The setting, too, rarely changes; most of the stories take place in and around Las Vegas, NV. Do you feel the book reads more like a novel or more like a collection of distinct, freestanding stories?
3. Three of the stories--"A Familiar Place," "True Love Versus the Cigar-Store Indian," and "This Life or the Next"--hinge on a scene in which an animal either harms Nick or is itself harmed. How does this fact influence the overall narrative of the book? How does it inform your understanding of Nick's world?
4. Growing up in Las Vegas, I was always fascinated by the desert outside the city, which, as deserts are, is at once beautiful and menacing. Most of the stories in *Greetings from Below* spotlight a scene that is set there. What role does the desert play in Nick's life? Throughout the book, does it ever seem to take on the qualities of a character?
5. The stories are told in both present tense and past, in both first person and third, though each story presents only Nick's perspective. What end does this serve? How does it affect your reading of the book?
6. Is the book espousing any particular outlook on addiction or obsession, sex or infidelity, love or grief?
7. In creating Nick's mother, Elizabeth, I wanted to show just how devastating the death of a loved one can be. What does her particular kind of suffering--i.e., her several, disparate addictions--say about the strain of bereavement, or even the very nature of sorrow?
8. How do Nick's various lovers, or near-lovers--Kilburg, My-Duyen, Indra, Mona, Meadow, and of course Annie--increase or deepen Nick's characterization in the book?
9. The penultimate story, "First Sight"--what one might argue is the narrative climax of the collection--is both epistolary and voyeuristic.

Trade Paperback / eBook
ISBN: 978-1-936747-67-2
eISBN: 978-1-936747-72-6
Price: \$14.95 / \$8.99
Trim: 6" x 9" / 80 pp

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Louisville, KY 40205
502/458-4028
www.sarabandebooks.org

Distributed to the trade by
Consortium Book Sales
& Distribution, Inc.
(800) 283-3572



How do these two characteristics impact Nick's discovery of Annie's unfaithfulness (after years of being unfaithful himself)?

10. After completing "First Sight," it occurred to me that Nick's father was never fully dramatized in the book; rather, he loomed in the background of Nick's life, a mere apparition to the reader. The impetus for "Crash Site on a Desert Mountain Outside Las Vegas" was a desire to give the reader a glimpse of the relationship Nick had with his father in the time leading up to his death. What does the story tell you about that relationship? What do you learn about Nick's father himself?

Writing Exercises:

1. Choose a theme from the book (love, loss, addiction, sexual identity, moral responsibility, et cetera) and write a short story that attempts to explore a different side of it--a side that is perhaps disregarded in *Greetings from Below*.
2. *Greetings from Below* has no dominant tense or point of view. Write a short story in the first person, using the present tense. Then write the same story in the third person, using the past tense. Which version works better, and why?

Further Reading:

Nine Stories, by J.D. Salinger
The Pugilist at Rest, by Thom Jones
Cathedral, by Raymond Carver
The Coast of Good Intentions, by Michael Byers
The Point, by Charles D'Ambrosio
Mary and O'Neil, by Justin Cronin
Send Me, by Patrick Ryan
Jesus' Son, by Denis Johnson
Bad Behavior, by Mary Gaitskill
The Question of Bruno, by Aleksandar Hemon