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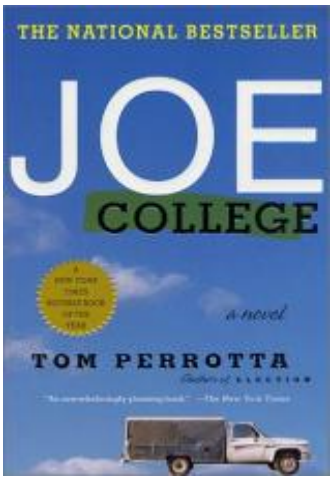
Joe College

by Tom Perrotta



About the Book

For many college students, Spring Break means fun and sun in Florida. For Danny, a Yale junior, it means two weeks behind the wheel of the Roach Coach, his father's lunch truck, which plies the parking lots of office parks in central New Jersey.

But Danny can use the time behind the coffee urn to try and make sense of a love life that's gotten a little complicated. There's loyal and patient hometown honey Cindy and her recently-dropped bombshell to contend with. And there's also lissome Polly back in New Haven--with her shifting moods, perfect thrift store dresses and inconvenient liaison with a dashing professor.

If girl problems aren't enough, there's the constant menace of the Lunch Monsters, a group of thugs who think Danny has planted the Roach Coach in their territory.

Joe College is Tom Perrotta's warmest and funniest fiction yet, a comic journey into the dark side of love, higher education and food service.

Discussion Guide

1. In their final encounter, Cindy suggests that Danny has taught her an important lesson. What is this lesson? Is it helpful or harmful to Cindy?

2. When he returns home for Spring Break, Danny has an epiphany of sorts, courtesy of a voice in his head: "I could just be myself, my father's son, living out my life in the town where I was born . . . . I could learn to love [Cindy] the way my father had learned to love my mother . . . . all that could be enough." Is this true? Or is Danny kidding himself?

3. Who grows and changes more over the course of the novel, Danny or Cindy?

4. Some readers feel that Danny gets off too easily in Joe College, that he's never really held accountable for his actions. How does Danny himself feel about this issue? What about the characters around him?

5. What does Danny's journey in Joe College tell us about social mobility and social class in America?

6. Is Danny simply living out the American Dream, an updated version of the Horatio Alger myth? Or is he the beneficiary of a flawed system that gives special privileges and opportunities to a chosen few?

7. The Lunch Monsters are a particular Perrotta creation. How do the thugs represent the author's attempt to flesh out Danny's guilt? Danny says, "There must have been something I was trying to prove by picking a fight with these guys," but it's not clear what Danny is trying to prove, or to whom. What do you feel he's trying to prove? Could it be an attempt to assuage his guilt over Cindy?

8. At several points in the story, the author uses a pause and an absence of sound to indicate that a significant event has just occurred. How do these pauses provide a framework for the momentum of the story?

Author Bio

Tom Perrotta is the author of 11 works of fiction, including ELECTION and LITTLE CHILDREN, both of which were made into Oscar-nominated films, and THE LEFTOVERS and MRS. FLETCHER, which were adapted into acclaimed HBO series. His new novel is GHOST TOWN.

Critical Praise

" Another perfectly pitched, subversively hilarious chronicle of prolonged adolescence...JOE COLLEGE almost makes you wish you could relive the whole godawful mess all over again. "

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