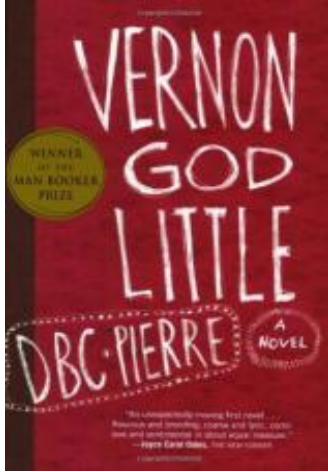


Vernon God Little

by DBC Pierre



About the Book

When sixteen kids are shot on high school grounds, everyone looks for someone to blame. Meet Vernon Little, under arrest at the sheriff's office, a teenager wearing nothing but yesterday's underwear and his prized logo sneakers. Moments after the shooter, his best buddy, turns the gun on himself, Vernon is pinned as an accomplice. Out for revenge are the townspeople, the cable news networks, and Deputy Vaine Gurie, a woman whose zeal for the Pritikin diet is eclipsed only by her appetite for barbecued ribs from the Bar-B-Chew Barn. So Vernon does what any red-blooded American teenager would do; he takes off for Mexico.

Vernon God Little is a provocatively satirical, riotously funny look at violence, materialism, and the American media.

Discussion Guide

1. How does Vernon's colloquial narrative voice help to develop him as a character? Does it ring true to you as the everyday speech of a young Texan? Do you "hear" Vernon speaking as you read? Is his voice different from the way characters in the book speak to one another? How does it change over the course of the novel?
2. How does the lack of male figures in Vernon's home life affect him? How does Lally's arrival change the dynamic of the household? How does Lally use his maleness to manipulate the situation, not just with Vernon's mother and her friends, but with Vernon himself?

3. What is represented by the "knife" that Vernon refers to throughout the book, starting on p. 7: "it's like [his mother] planted a knife in my back when I was born, and every fucken noise she makes just gives it a turn"? Later, he explains that parents "take every word in the fucken universe, and index it back to your knife . . . parents succeed by managing the database of your dumbness and your slime, ready for combat." (41) Do we all have "knives"? Are they created and used by our families, or by ourselves?

4. The question of cause and effect is central to novel. What do you think is the cause of the Martirio school shooting? Can there be more than one cause of an event like this? Is the town itself partly responsible for the massacre? Are Goosens and Nuckels? What about Jesus's classmates? If we read the "cause and effect balls" Vernon plays with obsessively in his death row cell as a metaphor, what might they tell us about these questions?

5. **Vernon God Little** contains elements of two classic American genres: the adolescent coming-of-age story and the road novel. Critics have mentioned the novel's similarity to *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. How would you compare *Vernon God Little* to these novels? What other novels (or stories, or films) did it remind you of? Do you think Pierre is consciously referring to these archetypal stories?

6. Discuss the role of consumerism in this novel. Vernon says that Jesus lacks power and status in part because "he can't afford new Brands. Licensed avenues of righteousness are out of his reach." (230) What does Vernon mean by "licensed avenues of righteousness?"

7. Vernon feels freer in Mexico than at home; he imagines that "there's a kind of immune system back home, to knock off your edges, wash out the feral genes, package you up with your knife . . . Down here, in another space and time, I spend a night among partners with correctly calibrated Mexican genes." (175) What is the difference Vernon is getting at here? Is he romanticizing Mexican life? What does it have, or lack, that allows him to feel free of his "knife"?

8. How does Vernon change and mature over the course of the novel? How does your attitude toward him change? Did you ever think that he had been part of the shooting?

9. Is the kind of cruelty shown by Jesus's classmates on the day of the shooting simply a fact of adolescent life, or is it a symptom of an unhealthy society? Do teenagers have a right to be free from teasing and harassment, or are they, as Charlotte Brewster suggests, naturally subject to the tyranny of the majority of their peers? Can the social persecution of Jesus be compared to the persecution of Vernon by media-influenced public opinion?

10. What is the role of the media in **Vernon God Little**? Why do we never meet a real reporter, one who is not a fraud or an opportunist like Lally? How does the media spotlight shape Martirio's reaction to the shootings? Do you think media coverage of tragedies and trials in recent years has gone too far? Has it had any positive effects?

11. What do you think of Lasalle's final advice to Vernon (p. 258-260)? He asks Vernon, " 'Where's this God you talk about? . . . Just fuckin people. You stuck with the rest of us in this snake-pit of human wants, wants frustrated and calcified into needs . . . Don't come cryin to me because you got in the way of another man's needs.'" Is this the root of Vernon's troubles? If he had not been "too darn embarrassed to play God," (261) if he had set out from the beginning to "give the people what they want," could he have avoided the predicament he finds himself in? What do you make of the fact that Lasalle turns out to have been an axe murderer?

12. What does **Vernon God Little** say about America? Is it effective as a commentary on our culture? How do humor and satire work in the novel to provide a new perspective on school violence?

Author Bio

DBC Pierre is the pen name of Peter Finlay, who was born in Australia in 1961 and divided most of the first twenty-three years of his life between Texas and Mexico City. He lives in Ireland.

Critical Praise

"If **Huckleberry Finn** were set on the Mexican-American border and written by the creators of *South Park*, it might read something like this."

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