



A Reading Group Guide to:

***The Great American Whatever***

By Tim Federle

**About the Book**

Quinn Roberts is a sixteen-year-old smart aleck whose only worry *used* to be writing convincing dialogue for the movies he made with his sister Annabeth. Of course, that was all before—before Quinn stopped going to school, before his mom started sleeping on the sofa . . . and before the car accident that changed everything.

Enter: Geoff, Quinn's best friend, who insists it's time that Quinn came out—at least from hibernation. One haircut later, Geoff drags Quinn to his first college party, where instead of nursing his pain, he meets a guy—okay, a *hot* guy—and Quinn falls hard. What follows is an upside-down week in which Quinn begins imagining his future as a screenplay that might actually have a happily-ever-after ending—if, that is, he can finally step back into the starring role of his own life story.

**Discussion Questions**

1. This book is written from the first-person point of view. Does hearing Quinn's inner dialogue help you to understand his character? What are some pros and cons of using first-person point of view to tell a story?
2. What are the three things you learn about Quinn in Chapter 1? What about his friendship with Geoff? His relationship with his mom? If this were the opening scene in a movie, would you keep watching?
3. How does the author present Geoff as a character? Is he an independent person, or just Quinn's sidekick? Do you agree with Quinn when he says that Geoff "wants to be famous; he just doesn't know what for yet"? Do you have any idea what Geoff might become famous for? Do you think eagerness for fame is a universal feeling, especially among young people in our current generation?
4. In Chapter 3, Quinn says, "If *you* think I'm a confusing person, imagine actually *being* me." Why does Quinn feel this way? Do you agree that Quinn is a confusing person?
5. Quinn is very protective of his mother. How is she coping with her losses—Annabeth, and her husband? Do you think she should take some responsibility for Quinn's withdrawing himself from his former life: school, filmmaking, his friends? At what point do you think an outside source needs to step in to help them both?
6. Discuss why the rooftop scene is an important one for plot and characterization. Quinn's

balloon becomes tangled in the railing: How is this a metaphor for his life? Why does he pop his balloon?

7. Discuss Amir's role in Quinn's story. Is he just the hot guy who gives Quinn his first romantic experience, or do his actions add more depth to the story? Does Quinn learn anything from Amir? Do you think Amir is the "right guy" for Quinn?

8. Quinn's sexuality is a large aspect of the story. In Chapter 7 he says, "I'm still not out. It seems like such a hassle to *come* out. I want to just *be* out." What does he mean by this? Why do you think it's still a challenge for some people to tell others that they are gay? How does Quinn come to terms with accepting who he is and embracing his sexuality?

9. Annabeth is an important character even though she is not present in the book. Can you think of other books and movies with a similar character, whose story is told through memories, flashbacks, or dreams? How is it different when you get to know a character only through someone else's view of her? Discuss the various clues you are given about Annabeth's life and death, how Quinn was involved, and how you learn the full story about her. How does her tragic death affect Quinn's thinking and behavior? How does Quinn remember his sister? What do you make of their sibling relationship?

10. At the end of Chapter 1, Quinn says, "Grief's best friend is boredom." Can you understand how this could be true? Discuss grief and the way it affects the plot throughout the story. How does each character handle their grief? Does Quinn's sense of humor make it easier or more difficult to relate to his loss and grief?

11. In Chapter 15, Quinn says, "Maybe I'm the unreliable narrator of my own life." Discuss the definition of an unreliable narrator. Do you agree with Quinn? Why would an author or screenwriter choose to use an unreliable narrator?

12. How convinced were you by Quinn's theory of corruption? Can there really be a moment in your life that changes you forever? Have you had this kind of moment in your life? What is the author suggesting about loss by expressing this theory?

13. Quinn is passionate about films, and throughout the novel he references many movies. How do his movie selections offer insight into his character? How is his love for movies described throughout the story? Are you an ardent fan of something, like Quinn is for film? If so, how does this influence who you are?

14. Describe Ricky Devlin's impact on Quinn when he was a young boy. Does Quinn's view of Ricky change when they see each other again, now that Ricky is a successful screenwriter? In terms of character development, why is this scene so critical for Quinn?

15. Describe the "Hero's Journey" and why Quinn thinks of it as his "life guide." What changes Quinn's thinking?

16. Talk about Quinn and Geoff's friendship. Does it seem authentic, or a matter of convenience? Are they more like friends, brothers, or both?

17. Discuss the role of secrets in this novel. Why is it so upsetting for Quinn to find out about Geoff and Annabeth's secret? Why do you think they kept this hidden from Quinn? Does he feel foolish, angry, jealous? How would you feel if you were Quinn, learning this secret for the first time? Was he not as close to Annabeth or Geoff as he thought he was? Why can secrets be so damaging, especially to the people you love?

18. After getting to know Quinn through his story, do you agree with Geoff when he says to Quinn, "You never notice anything if it's not about you?" Is Quinn that self-centered? If so, why doesn't everyone hate him? Do you know someone who is self-absorbed? How does it affect their ability to have strong relationships?

19. At certain times in the book, Quinn describes himself in different ways: as a person who could find the humor in any situation, the guy people now pity, and even a monster. Which of these descriptions do you most agree with?

20. Chapter 23 lists Quinn's Top Ten Movie Quotes, though number ten is still unwritten. Suggest some possibilities for number ten that you think Quinn would appreciate. How does your choice resonate with you personally?

21. In terms of the themes in the novel, discuss the significance of the name Q & A Productions.

22. Do the characters in the novel ever come to terms with their grief? How do Quinn and his mother ultimately help each other?

### **Writing and Research**

1. Write an essay comparing this novel with another that features a main character who is, or feels like, an outsider. What is it that keeps them apart—race, sexuality, personality? Discuss the role of the outsider in fiction and how this enhances plot and theme. Are there other themes the two novels have in common?

2. Research and write a report on the differences in writing a novel and a screenplay.

3. At the balloon party, Carly asks her friends, "Does everybody have three things they wish they could just let go of?" Write about *your* three things: what they are, why you want to let go of them, and how your life would be different if you could.

4. Choose a theme in the novel that is universal to teens and organize a panel discussion to present to your class.

5. Choose a small but important sequence of events from your life and write it up as a screenplay, as Quinn does several times in the book. Then write an analysis of your scene. Does structuring a scene this way enable you to look more critically at it, and give you some distance? Are there things you would change in this scene? Can you imagine that it would be interesting, or not interesting, to others? Would it make a good scene in a movie?

6. Write an essay on the concept of letting go. You can include personal experience, popular psychology, and discussion of the theme in books and movies.
7. Reread the last paragraph in Chapter 33 and write an essay on the meaning behind the parallel between moments and fireflies.
8. Choose two movies mentioned in the novel, and create a Venn diagram to compare and contrast the plot, theme, and characterization. Determine why these movies would resonate with Quinn.

*Guide written by Bobbie Combs, a consultant at We Love Children's Books.*

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