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Discussion Questions: ***An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*** by Brock Clarke

Reading Group Guide

- 1) The novel makes fun of reader's guides found in the back of books, the kind of reader's guides that ask questions like "How does this book make you feel about the Human Condition?" (page 85). What, if anything, is objectionable about these sorts of questions, these sorts of guides? What questions might we ask instead of these questions? And what is the "Human Condition" anyway?
- 2) The novel is interested in New England, in the way Sam sees it and the way other people see it; in the way it's been portrayed in books and the way Sam portrays it in the book(s) he's writing. What are the clichés associated with New England, its people, its landscape, its literature? Is the problem with these clichés that they have no foundation in reality or that they're so familiar that they prevent us from seeing what New England is, or might be, beyond the clichés? Does the novel help you see New England (and the literature about it) in ways that the *Writer in Residence* and his story (page 204) do not?
- 3) Why doesn't Sam just tell his wife and kids the truth about his past? He says, on this subject, "Because this is what you do when you're a liar: you tell a lie, and then another one, and after a while you hope that the lies end up being less painful than the truth, or at least that is the lie you tell yourself" (pages 40-41). Does this kind of claim make you sympathize? And do you believe that because Sam lies to his family, he doesn't really love them?
- 4) The novel explores stories, why we write them and why we read them, what we hope to get out of them and whether we can (or should) get out of them what we want to get out of them. How would you describe the feelings some of these characters (Lees Ardor, Peter Le Clair, Sam Pulsifer, Elizabeth Pulsifer, the bond analysts) feelings about books? What do they want, or not want, to get from reading and writing? Why do we read books? What do we want to get from our reading? And if we don't get what we want, does this mean the book is a failure?
- 5) Memoirs are everywhere in *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*. Are they as unavoidable in real life as they are in this book? What is the author saying about

memoirs, about their place and role in our culture? When he satirizes memoirs, is he also satirizing the people who read them? If so, why? What might novels in general-and this novel in particular-do that memoirs cannot, or should not?

6) On page 249, Thomas Coleman says of Sam's parents, "They're not bad people." Do you feel the same way-not only about Sam's parents but also about Sam, Thomas, all the people who want Sam to burn down writers' homes? After all, these characters do, or want to do, awful things. If these things don't make them bad people, then why not? How does the novel help you see these people beyond some of the bad things they do?

7) Sam receives letters from hundreds of people, asking him to burn down various writers' homes in New England. And yet (with the exception of Lees Ardor) this anger toward the writers' houses seem to have little to do with the writers' books. Why? Why do we care about writers' homes in the first place? Do we visit writers' homes because they intensify the feelings we have about their books or because they give us some insight the books do not?

8) Speaking of Lees Ardor, what's her problem? And why does she repeatedly use one particular bad word? And the bond analysts: why don't they stop worrying about writing their memoirs and go back to analyzing bonds, whatever that is? And Sam's mother: if she has to give up something, why not drinking instead of books? And then Peter Le Clair: why doesn't he just talk already? And then all of the other characters, with their ridiculous troubles, most of which they've brought on themselves and deserve? What's up with them? What is wrong with these people?

9) Sam says that "to be a son is to lie to yourself about your father" (page 176). What does he mean by this? Is this only true for the father and son in the book, or is it true of all fathers and sons? Is this the Human Condition we wondered about earlier?

10) Sam says, "all men are but slight variations on the very same theme" (page 258). Is this true, or is this just something Sam says to make himself feel better? And if it is true, then why do the "capable" women in the book care so much about these men?