

Activities for *The Whisper of the River*

- ❖ You might want to begin this session by giving students *The Whisper Quiz*, either for a “grade” or class participation points or to simply see how many students actually read the book. The remainder of the discussion topics might have to be modified if only a few students have read the book because the topics ask specific, detailed questions. Review answers.
- ❖ It is suggested that instructors begin this discussion by asking the questions: Did this book offend you? If so, why? Asking these questions first clears the air so that students may have a more productive discussion. Often students who are offended discuss the language of the book and/or the references to sex. Students might also discuss the questions raised by the book about the role of women, gays, and race, but if they do not, be sure to ask if they thought at all about how this book addressed those topics. Also remember to ask students how these two topics are addressed differently now verses the late 30s and early 40s when this book takes place.
- ❖ Next, have students prepare for an activity. Divide the group in half. Tell one group to make a list of Porter’s hopes, fears, and expectations, and let the other group make a list of their own hopes, fears, and expectations, without allowing each group to know what the other is doing. At the end of five minutes of brainstorming have both groups read their lists out loud to the class. Often, the lists are very similar. Ask student why this is so.

Discussion . . .

- ❖ Following the activity with the questions: What are some good choices Porter made while at Willingham? What are some poor choices? Good choices often include his study habits as well as his eagerness to form relationships with his instructors. Some students mention Porter’s pranks as bad choices. Remind student that as a freshman, Porter was only 16 and was quite immature. Ask them why Porter chose to carry out the pranks and how he dealt with their consequences. Do they think Porter was a prankster in order to set himself apart or in order to gain acceptance or for some other reason? Why did he continue to pull pranks even though he faced punishment? (It is sometimes fun to read excerpts of Porter’s pranks: pages 98-99 include the passage where Porter sets the water bucket up over the door; pages 186-187 are about Porter’s prank with the mouse, and pages 432-433 describe Porter’s toilet paper prank.)
- ❖ Next, ask students why they are asked to read *The Whisper of the River*? Many answers involve Mercer history and the fact that it was written by an alumnus, but you should also prompt students to think about the importance of Porter’s first-year transition and adjustment to college.

- ❖ What influence did Porter's parents have on his transition to college? How are your parents' influences similar and different? This might be a good time to discuss why Porter hid the letters from his mother that he received. Also, how did Mr. Osborne's talk with Porter on the way to Willingham influence his transition? Ask the students if they have talked to their parents about similar topics and how their parents' advice is different from Porter's fathers' advice. (See pages 16-23 of *The Whisper of the River* – you might consider reading excerpts from these pages, particularly Mr. Osborne's advice about money).
- ❖ How did Porter deal with homesickness? (Page 114 gives a description of one of Porter's homesick episodes.) This is often a good time to talk about homesickness since many first-year students experience it (even though they will probably never admit to it). Suggest ways to deal with homesickness such as getting involved on campus. Suggest that they attend the involvement fair and choose organizations in which they are interested. The more involved students are, the less time they have to think about being homesick. Try to encourage them to get together as an O-group once a week (maybe in the UC or somewhere else on campus during the 10 o'clock hour on Monday or Friday) just to chat. This type of O-group bonding often builds a strong group of first-year students who feel accepted and can help and encourage each other during their first year.
- ❖ Prepare students from another activity. Read one of the letters (or an excerpt) from Mrs. Osborne to Porter (a good example can be found on page 55) and one from Porter to his mother (pages 104-106). Give each student a postcard and have them write a short note to someone they miss from home, telling their loved one about what transitions they are experiencing so far or about their initial reactions of Mercer.

More Discussion . . .

- ❖ How did Porter handle his academic transition to Willingham? Did his previous education prepare him for the challenges of college life? What do you think has prepared you for the academic transition from high school to college? (Consider reading an excerpt from pages 145-151 from Porter's meeting with Dr. Huber after he discovers that he might fail French. Ask students if they fear encountering a similar situation.)
- ❖ Have students think about the relationships Porter forged during college with students, faculty, and staff. Which one(s) of these relationships had the most influence on Porter? Ask students why is it important to bond with fellow students, faculty, and staff members. Do they think any of their relationships will be similar to Porter's? Have students consider Porter's relationships with the following: Boston Harbor Jones, Tiny Yeoman, Mrs. Capulet, Dr. Rudh, and his fraternity brothers. Some questions to consider: How did Porter's relationship with Boston change after Boston went away? How did Tiny's attempted suicide change their relationship? Did Porter's view of Mrs. Capulet change throughout his first year? Why did Porter go to Dr. Rudh after visiting Tiny in the hospital? Were Porter's relationships with his fraternity brothers love/hate relationships?

- ❖ Next, have students consider how Porter’s living environments affected his college experience. How did he interact with his roommates? Would students have handled the situations differently? (Have students consider his relationships with Bob Cater, Tom Christian, and Mike Jurkiedyk.) What challenges do they think students today face with their living environments? How are those challenges different for students who commute?
- ❖ Ask students to think about how Porter’s sense of the importance of community changed throughout the book? In what ways did he work to integrate himself into his new community, both socially and academically? In what ways did he distance himself from that community? Why is community important at Mercer today, and what are some ways that students can get involved in the Mercer community?
- ❖ Have students consider how Porter’s understanding of religion changed after he went to Willingham. What does being “raised right” mean to Porter? How did Porter view religion when he arrived at Willingham? Why was it important to him to read the Bible and pray everyday? How did the events of his years at Willingham change his understanding of the role of God in his life?
- ❖ Lastly, ask students how Porter changes and evolves through the book? In what ways is he a different person at the end of the book? In what ways is he the same person? How is Porter a more enlightened person (both academically and non-academically) after his years of higher learning? How do his interactions with Tiny, Vashti, Dr. Rudh, and Boston expand his view of the world?

❖ Extras!

Make copies of *The Whisper of the River* handout taken from the Tarver Library website and let them read about the people behind the characters in the book.

You might also want to take them on the “Porter Osborne Tour” around the center of campus. Begin at the Administration Building by reading the description of Willingham University found on pages 24-26 of *The Whisper of the River*. “The Chapel” is, of course, Willingham Hall, and the “Baptist Church” is now Newton Chapel. What Porter knew as the “Chemistry Building” is now Ware Hall which houses the Psychology Department and Groover Hall which currently holds IDS was known to Porter as the “Christianity Building.” The “unapproachable” Law Building is Ryals Hall today, and the Library (which is described as looking like a flapper) is now Hardman Hall that houses the art department. Ware Hall, described as a “crew-cut and flamboyant” building was the Biology Building in Porter’s day. Walk around the Quad as you talk about each of the buildings and then head to Sherwood Hall, where Porter lived, remembering to highlight the memorial to Lee Battle, one of the “real life” components of Boston Harbor Jones located in front of the building.

If you choose to take the group on a tour of the tour, discuss how the function of the administration building has changed since Porter’s time. Ask students what types of activities were held there in *The Whisper of the River* (fraternity and sorority meetings etc.) and then discuss its function now. As your group (or part of it) is ascending to the tower, read the passage found on pages 372-373 of the description of Porter climbing to the tower.

Additional Discussion

Feel free to continue remaining discussion items during other O-group meetings or into your classes during the fall.