



Book Club in a Bag

Discussion Questions

“Fifth Business” by Robertson Davies

1. Dunstan Ramsay feels compelled to write his autobiography after reading a patronizing portrait of himself in the school newspaper, in which he is presented as “a typical old schoolmaster doddering into retirement with tears in his eyes and a drop hanging from his nose” (p. 5). He feels the piece depicts him as a man who never had a life outside the classroom. How does Ramsay present himself in correcting this account? In what ways does the novel show the depth and complexity of character that lie beneath the clichés we quickly, and sometimes dismissively, use to sum up the lives of others?
2. Ramsay titles the chapter dealing with his war years “I Am Born Again” (p. 58). In what ways does the war change him? Why does he vow, after returning home, to “live henceforth for my own satisfaction” (p. 79)? What is the most life-altering experience he has during the war?
3. Padre Blazon asks Ramsay about the significance of Mrs. Dempster: “What figure is she in your personal mythology? If she appeared to save you on the battlefield, as you say, it has just as much to do with you as it has with her—much more probably” (p. 165). Why is Mrs. Dempster so important to Ramsay? In what ways has his interaction with her changed the course of his life? Why does Ramsay think she is a saint?
4. Dunstan Ramsay is fascinated by what he calls “a world of wonders”: saints, mythologies, miraculous events. “Why do people all over the world, and at all times,” he asks, “want marvels that defy all verifiable facts? And are the marvels brought into being by their desire, or is their desire an assurance rising from some deep knowledge, not to be directly experienced and questioned, that the marvelous is indeed an aspect of the real?” (p. 186). How would you answer these questions?

The above questions were taken from Penguin Random House, Readers' Guide.
www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/354248/fifth-business-by-robertson-davies/9780141186153/readers-guide/

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