A Graywolf Press Reading Group Guide

TUMBLEDOWN

A Novel

Robert Boswell



Discussion Questions

- 1. Early in the book we learn the IQ scores of several characters, as well as several cultural figures (page 57). How does this information frame how you read the rest of the book and evaluate the characters? Why do you think only Karly's score is officially on record? Do you think intelligence tests and tests of "psychological disorders" reveal the truth, or could the tests themselves be biased?
- 2. Maura Wood—brazen, bold, "a rebel without a cause" as Billy describes her—loves schizophrenia-diagnosed Mick and pursues a lop-sided friendship. "She wanted him to be well, and she needed him to be ill" (page 93). Why do we "need" people to be something that they don't want to be? How is Maura different from other characters? Is she more dangerous to others or herself?
- 3. In Same Man (the comic written by Candler and Billy, and illustrated by Candler's mentally impaired older brother, Pook), all the characters have the same face. One of Same Man's tasks "was to keep the good guys and the bad guys straight" (page 140). Is this a larger theme in the book, or are there no good or bad guys? What is the larger connection between mental instability and artistic representation?
- 4. In chapter four we learn that Candler keeps a notebook of profound things his clients have said, like, "The loud beneath the image sketches, but also there's the buttoned-up absence we don't need to distill" and "I disorder you" (pages 150–51). What do these statements suggest about Candler's clients? What does it suggest about Candler that he finds them meaningful?
- 5. Candler is given an enormous amount of responsibility for his clients, and yet he has almost no responsibility for himself. How does this affect his own life and the lives of his clients and loved ones?

- 6. After the party for Candler and Lolly, a slightly inebriated Violet drives the three of them home. "The alcohol she had consumed was not enough to hinder her driving, and neither was it enough to make the dark world beautiful, but just another obstacle to get beyond" (page 247). How does this compare to how Mick describes the effect of his meds? Is this ironic in any way?
- 7. At Barnstone's house Mick confesses that he doesn't like to say the name of his illness (page 301). Later in the same chapter, Lolly admits that she adopts various "costumes" in life (page 310). Is illness something to be ashamed of? How are diagnoses like costumes?
- 8. During Mick's suicide attempt we learn that this isn't Mick's first brush with death. "And his illness, when it descended—that, too, had been a kind of death" (page 385). Mick also states that he doesn't didn't feel alive when he takes his medication. Do you agree that illness is a kind of death? Do all illnesses need to be cured? Could an illness ever be seen as an advantage?
- 9. Toward the end there are two alternating and competing narratives going on at the same time. Which one do you believe? How might the narrative structure—switching back-and-forth between two possible realities—mimic mental illness?
- 10. What statement(s) do you think Boswell is making about mental illness and mental rehabilitation clinics? How would you change the way we think about and treat mental illness?

My Best Day as a Counselor

Robert Boswell

I was wide-eyed and twenty-five, a piping hot graduate degree held snugly in my fist, a metallic blue sports car parked rakishly in my drive, a lovely and lively girlfriend perched weightlessly on my shoulders, and an intimate view of the cerebrally gray or cosmologically blue or (rarely) ghostly green Pacific Ocean lingering daily out my living room window and calling nightly at my bedroom glass, offering either the encouraging *shh* of sleep or the simple celebratory gift of applause. If maybe that life was held together by nothing more than fraying twine, chewing gum, and aging postage stamps (I couldn't really afford the apartment or the car), it was nonetheless a life to be envied. I envied it even as I lived it.

All of which is to say: I was living somebody's dream and I would only slowly discover that it wasn't mine.

My degree was in counseling, specializing in evaluation. I was the guy to whom other counselors sent their mystery clients. What do I do with this one? Or: She thinks she wants to be an architect. Is there a chance in hades she could do it? Of course, the questions were always couched in the euphemistic, uber-correct, and occasionally inhuman lingo of the profession, but the gist was always the same: This person must change her life; how do I guide her?

The evaluation center was in a rundown building beneath the blood bank, near the all-night doughnut shop, and across the street from a new age religious sect that believed in reincarnation and claimed to be from Venus. It was a neighborhood of storefront churches, dive bars, aging fast-food franchises, and government agencies. The window in my office started a foot above the busy sidewalk. The glass was filmed to prohibit prying eyes from peering in, which made my view of the human traffic hazy and unreal. I remember seeing one client, an obstinately cynical and pessimistic young woman, staring past me to the window, which caused me to turn: a homeless man, a

sidewalk regular, leaned against the window with his forearm while smoking a cigarette and urinating against the glass, his smoke and stream made purple by the combination of window tinting and morning sunlight. I instinctively rolled my chair to the side to conceal his exposed willie, which evidently made it seem like he was peeing on my head, as the dour young woman suddenly erupted in laughter. I laughed with her, and following that bout of shared hilarity, our relationship changed, deepened, solidified, became trusting—one of many unlikely breakthroughs.

The evaluations I orchestrated with my team of technicians were thorough. We might spend two or three weeks with a client, giving tests to measure such things as fine motor skills, general intelligence, psychological readiness, physical limitations, as well as the client's tastes, interests, predilections, hopes, desires, and dreams. At the end, I would write a report, linking together human ambition with human potential, which would result in a series of recommendations:

Unfortunately, the training course in automotive mechanics appears to be unrealistic at this time...

His hygiene is one of the most significant stumbling blocks to his success... While she has the intelligence to get a college degree, she does not yet have the patience to sit through classes that bore her...

The results suggest that his difficulty reading may be a symptom of a larger neurological disorder . . .

Despite the way she presents herself, she scores in the normal intelligence range, which suggests that her misleading behavior has been learned . . .

His habitual anger makes any kind of sustained employment unlikely . . . Until the client's living situation is addressed, the recommendations that follow are essentially moot . . .

Her daily desire to drive headlong into the telephone pole at the far end of the parking lot cannot be entirely ignored . . .

I saw all kinds of people, each with his own particular reason for desiring metamorphosis. Some had physical disabilities, some were schizophrenic or bi-polar, some were welfare recipients, some were Vietnam veterans, and some had paid for their own evaluations—people in middle age who wanted a new path, professionals who were successful but suicidal, widows and widowers looking to see how they might reinvent themselves. Late in my two-year stay, we would find a loophole and offer free evaluations to anyone who asked. It got really wild then.

One of my clients—I'll call him Jeremy—had fallen from a tree when he was sixteen. He was paralyzed below the waist, nineteen now, and living on his own. He had never finished high school, and his rehabilitation counselor wanted to know what he was capable of doing with his life. The first thing I noticed: he was amazing in his wheelchair. He would pop a wheelie, turn the wheels in opposite directions simultaneously, and spin the chair on a dime. No obstacle course could slow him.

I had him in the evaluation center for two weeks, and I put him through a long list of physical and mental tests, as well as a number of psychological profiles and interest exams. During one of the early interviews, I discovered two things that made me curious. First, not only did he live alone, but he lived in a trailer.

"How in the world did you find a trailer that accommodates a wheelchair?" I asked.

"What're you talking bout?" he replied. His practice was to crawl up the steps to his trailer, dragging up his legs, and then crawl around the trailer on his fists.

Second item of note: he drove a car that had no handicap modifications.

"How do you operate the gas and brake?" I asked.

"I keep a cane in the car," he explained, and then mimed poking the gas, the brakes.

"Take me on a ride," I said.

He wheeled and I walked to his car—an old American-made boat the color of twilight. He opened the passenger door, lifted himself from the chair, and sort of threw himself inside. Then he leaned outside, collapsed the wheelchair, and yanked it in beside him. He slid over to the steering wheel.

I moved the wheelchair to the trunk and sat beside him. He talked while he drove, about sports and books and girls and falling out of the tree. He drove like a typical teenage boy—switching lanes, tailgating, passing unnecessarily—all by means of prodding the pedals with his cane. It was at the time, and remains still, one of the most terrifying excursions of my life.

At his trailer, I returned the wheelchair to the front seat so he could show me his regular procedure. He shoved it out the passenger side and lowered his body into it, letting it rock back when he landed to scare me. He slammed the car door and wheeled to the trailer steps.

It was an ancient, unattractive, rust-stained, mustard-colored heap, without an ounce of charm.

Entering the door involved a complicated dance of key and lock, body and stairs. I can't remember what he did with the wheelchair, but I think he pulled it in after he had crawled inside and pulled in his legs after him. He gave me a tour of the trailer, slithering about it without strain. Books and clothes and things were piled on the floor, but otherwise there was no alteration for his disability. He pulled himself up onto a chair and offered me a drink.

Here, I'll reveal the obvious: I liked the kid a lot. I was only six years older than he, and it was my first real job—the first that could lead to a career. I'd had a million stupid jobs to put myself through college and graduate school, but this was my career. (Or so I thought at the time.) My plan was to work in the daytime and write fiction at night. I remember showing a story to my girlfriend of the time—the aforementioned lovely person—who said, "It's a cool story, I guess, but why so depressing?" This is what everyone tends to say about literary fiction. I tried taking a community college creative writing course, and I wound up becoming friends with the teacher—a poet with an MFA who had studied with future poet laureate Philip Levine and had given me Levine's poems to read. As my teacher, he advised me to quit my job and go back to college to study creative writing.

"I just got this job," I told him.

"That ought to make it easier to ditch," he replied.

It's true that the job was not always fun. Some people believe that tests are a golden measure than cannot be contradicted, and there were several occasions when I felt the test results were too persuasive with the counselors. The most memorable (i.e., *miserable*) occasion: a young African American woman wound up with an IQ score that put her in the mildly impaired range (at that time, the therapeutic world still used the term "retarded," but it is no longer considered acceptable). This would have made her ineligible for the training program that interested her. I reported the score in my report, but I pointed out that African Americans tended to score lower on the test than whites, due to what appeared to be a racial bias built into the instrument. In other words, the score did not reflect her abilities, and my days with her at the evaluation center confirmed that she was *not* mentally impaired. She was poorly educated but quite capable of learning everything in the training program. I suggested a math tutor for one piece of the

program. The client is powerfully motivated and should be able to complete the training successfully.

The counselor called me, unhappy with the recommendation. "You're coddling," she said. In the counselor's opinion, if the IQ score said that she was mildly mentally retarded, then that was fact, and I was a coward and a liar to suggest otherwise.

I argued with her on the phone and in a follow-up letter, but when she next met with her client she told her that the test scores showed her to be retarded. Furious and indignant, the young woman quit seeing the counselor and dropped out of program. Some months later, I happened to run into her in the grocery story. She screamed at me. "I'm not retarded," she said, an accusing finger aimed at my throat.

I agreed with her and tried to explain, but there was no way to explain. I had damaged this woman's life. I wished that I had not reported the scores, but I knew that if I started deciding which scores to report and which to conceal I'd be playing god.

And wasn't I already sort of playing god by spending a couple of weeks with a person and then saying what they were and were not capable of doing?

Jeremy's evaluation seemed simple. He needed a car with handicap controls—for his own safety, as well for the safety of motorists everywhere. He needed a handicap-accessible apartment. And he ought to go to college. Despite never having finished high school, he was bright and academically capable. I set him up to take the GED exam. I made a list of the careers that he might wish to pursue upon graduation.

On Jeremy's last day, when we met for the final time, I went over all of the test scores and talked to him about the recommendations that would appear in the report. He listened and nodded, pleased with all of it. But when I finished he said that he wanted me to consider one other thing. He said, "Watch this."

He bent down and pulled the strap from his right foot. He yanked off the shoe and sock. He lifted the foot with his hands and awkwardly placed his bare foot on my desk. "This'll take a minute," he said and started rocking back and forth in his chair, his eyes shut. After several seconds of this, his face turned red. He breathing got heavy. Sweat burst from his forehead. He gestured frantically with his hand at the limp foot on my desk.

"See it?" he called out. "See it?"

His second toe wiggled slightly. It moved back and forth, perhaps one quarter of an inch.

"I see it," I said softly.

He stopped rocking, collapsed against the back of the wheelchair, and took several quick breaths before opening his eyes. He said, "I think I could walk again."

I did not speak. I let him catch his breath.

He wanted me to recommend a program of physical rehabilitation at a famous facility—a very expensive and exclusive program.

It was a heartbreakingly absurd request. I was not a physician, and I had given him no tests to measure the extent of his paralysis, and I was fairly certain that if I referred him to a specialist his toe tremor would not get him into any program.

And yet, he was awfully good with that wheelchair. How much of his circus wheelchair antics would an examining doctor witness? Would an M.D. get to see him navigating Southern California traffic by means of a cane? If anyone had a chance to accomplish the impossible, I thought . . . Oh, I had no business whatsoever recommending the therapy he requested.

I'm not retarded, the young woman had shouted at me, and I heard her again in my office while Jeremy bent awkwardly to pull on his sock and shoe.

"I'll see what I can do," I told him.

Here's the dirty secret behind that small promise: for him to have even a tiny chance of getting funded, my report would have to suggest that his test scores made this a reasonable proposal. I would have to contort the meaning of his scores. I would have to invent a rationale.

It didn't surprise me that Jeremy's counselor called after receiving my report. She had no trouble approving the car controls, the GED and subsequent college enrollment, and she put him on a list for handicap housing. She called to ask about rehab program.

In response to her careful, tactful, professional questions, I responded, "He's a remarkable kid. I think he has a chance." I don't think that I lied outright, simply ducked direct response to her questions about the tests.

She made it clear what funding Jeremy would mean. Funds were limited. Some other client would have to wait for the new fiscal year to get the training or education or therapy she needed.

When I hung up the phone, I closed my office door and watched the

ghosts moving along the sidewalk. *I am not cut out for this job*, I thought. *I should quit. I should try to pursue my own authentic desires*. I drank too much that night and spent the weekend reading John Cheever.

Three months later, I was once again sitting in my office, staring out at the street, when Jeremy walked past my window.

I leapt from my chair. I ran down the corridor, through the waiting room, past the startled secretary, and out into the sunlight. His legs were in silver braces and he held two long metal crutches with handgrips and arm cuffs. He smiled at me. "I was just coming to see you," he said. He offered a shy smile. "I'm not ready for dance classes or anything . . ." He paused for a long moment, studying the dirty street, the people swerving around us on the sidewalk, before adding, "But I like the view from up here."

We talked only a short while. And later, after Jeremy was gone, after I was through with my clients for the day, I closed the door to my office, seated myself behind my desk, and wept. I'd like to say they were tears of gratitude, and I would not be ashamed to say that they were tears of relief. But I don't really know why I cried, and if I took every test in the center's arsenal, I still wouldn't be able to say. Maybe I was crying because I understood how close I'd come to not recommending the therapy. His success made me painfully aware that I could have failed him.

This was my best day as a counselor, and it also marked the beginning of the end. I had behaved unprofessionally and it had worked out—that's a bad combination. My professional life had suddenly become much more complicated. I questioned test scores, started couching certain results in a dismissive fashion—or I left them out altogether. I became a loose cannon.

It took another nudge or two, but not too long after this I applied to graduate programs in creative writing. When I was accepted into one of them, I told my boss that I would be quitting in the fall. I sold my sports car, gave up my place on the beach, kissed my girlfriend good-bye, and left San Diego for Tucson, Arizona.

In the thirty years of writing that have followed, I've resisted telling this story. Oh, I've put Jeremy in novels and stories, but I've always later taken him out. And while I've imagined what he might be doing these days with his life, I never saw him again after the day he walked by my window. He had come to thank me, having no idea that his actions would set me free.

ROBERT BOSWELL has published seven novels, three story collections, and two books of nonfiction. He has had one play produced. His work has earned him two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships, a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Iowa School of Letters Award for Fiction, a Lila Wallace/Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, the PEN West Award for Fiction, the John Gassner Prize for Playwriting, and the Evil Companions Award. The Heyday of the Insensitive Bastards was a finalist for the 2010 PEN USA Award in Fiction, What Men Call Treasure was a finalist for the Western Writers of America Nonfiction Spur Award. Both the Chicago Tribune and Publishers Weekly named Mystery Ride as one of the best books of the year. The Independent (London) picked The Geography of Desire as one of the best books of the year. Virtual Death was a finalist for the Philip K. Dick Award and was named by the Science Fiction Chronicle as one of the best novels of the year. Boswell has published more than seventy stories and essays. They have appeared in the New Yorker, Best American Short Stories, O. Henry Prize Stories, Pushcart Prize Stories, Esquire, Colorado Review, Epoch, Ploughshares, and many other magazines and anthologies. He teaches at the University of Houston, where he holds the Cullen Endowed Chair in Creative Writing.