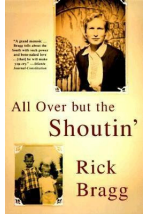


# Opportunities to Affect: In Reading Groups

By: Melissa Browning

## All Over but the Shoutin'

Rick Bragg



### For Group Reflection and Discussion

In his memoir *All Over but the Shoutin'*, Rick Bragg gives his readers an intimate look at poverty and faith in the rural South. Bragg tells the stories of his family in a way that allows readers to imagine they had been invited over for dinner. This powerful book by a gifted storyteller won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing.

### Part 1: The Widow's Mite

1. Bragg begins his memoir by saying, "This is not an important book" (p. xi). In reflecting on this, how important are our stories? What can our stories teach others and ourselves about life?
2. For those who are not from the South, reading this book might feel like visiting another culture. For those from the South, it might feel like coming home. What can we learn from Bragg's narrative about the importance of belonging? How might this help us welcome internationals or others that might not "fit in"?
3. Bragg talks about rural poverty throughout the book. Why do you think rural poverty exists?
4. In this section of the book, Bragg talks about himself as a kid and the way he experienced shame as a result of being poor. He gives examples of teachers who looked down on him (pp. 42, 55) and a fraternity that saw him as a charity case (p. 97). Reflecting on his experiences, how can we minister among those who are poor without robbing them of their dignity?
5. How is the poverty Bragg talks about similar to the poverty seen by the Andersons in their work in North Carolina? (See the *CBF fellowship!* article, "The Hands and Feet of Christ: CBF Field Personnel Serve Among Homeless in Rural North Carolina County" in the September-October issue.)
6. It is important to Bragg that he "do right" by his mamma and make up for the pain his daddy caused. How does this drive shape the story of his life?
7. Bragg talks about the time he went to church as a kid (ch. 9) and how badly he wanted to fit in, to feel what everyone was feeling. Why do you think he never felt that he fit in?
8. Throughout the book Bragg seems to hold religion in esteem, yet at a distance. What obstacles keep him from experiencing faith at a personal level?

### Part 2: Lies to My Mother

1. Bragg begins this section by saying he didn't tell his mamma about his work because he didn't want to bring her more sadness. He asks, "How do you go to a woman who lives at the foot of a mountain of sadness and shovel more around her ankles, the sadness of strangers?" Do you agree with his decision? What would you have done in his situation?
2. In chapter 19, "The Price Tag on Heaven," Bragg talks about heaven and says, "I'd always figured that if I did right by my momma, I had a shot." What does this statement tell us about Bragg's faith?
3. Do you think Bragg is jaded about religion because of the poverty he grew up in? Do you think he blames God for his situation?
4. In the stories Bragg tells about other people's sadness and his own pain, a recurring theme surfaces: Why do bad things happen to good people? This is a question many of us have also asked. Why do you think bad things happen to good people? Where is God in the midst of this pain and suffering?
5. Bragg says, "You can dream on welfare. You can hope as you take in ironing. It is just less painful if you don't" (p. 153). How do you respond to this statement?
6. Bragg writes about other peoples' pain, about death and poverty; and he believes his writing is connected to his own suffering. Do you think this is a calling?
7. Would you consider Bragg a person of faith? If so, how would you describe his faith?

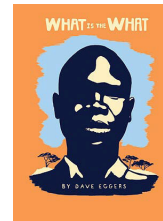
### Part 3: Getting Even with Life

1. Throughout the book Bragg talks about race and class. While racism often gets attention when we talk about injustice, classism is more often overlooked. What does Bragg's narrative teach us about the role of class in our culture? As Christians called to do justice, what are our obligations surrounding issues of racism and classism?
2. Bragg talks about his Pulitzer Prize as a validation of his mother's sacrifice and says he knows this will bring her attention and respect (p. 296). How does this relate to the issue of class?
3. When reflecting on the Pulitzer Prize, Bragg says, "It is a common condition of being poor white trash: you are always afraid that the good things in your life are temporary, that someone can take them away, because you have no power beyond your own brute strength to stop them" (p. 297). How does this view shape Bragg's life? Do you think this same attitude makes his brother, Mark, reckless with his life?
4. In the above quote and throughout the book, Bragg uses the phrase "poor white trash." What feelings or images does this phrase elicit? What does it teach us about race and class?

5. Toward the end of the book (ch. 39), Bragg tells the story of buying his mamma a house. How does this event help Bragg feel redeemed or vindicated? Does it bring him the happiness (or his family the happiness) he hoped for?
6. After reading Bragg's book, what insights have you learned about rural poverty and poverty in general?

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# next month:



*What Is the What?* by Dave Eggers is the fictional autobiography of Valentino Achak Deng, a "Lost Boy" from Sudan. Eggers's story uses terrific detail to describe his survival of the war in refugee camps and immigration to America.