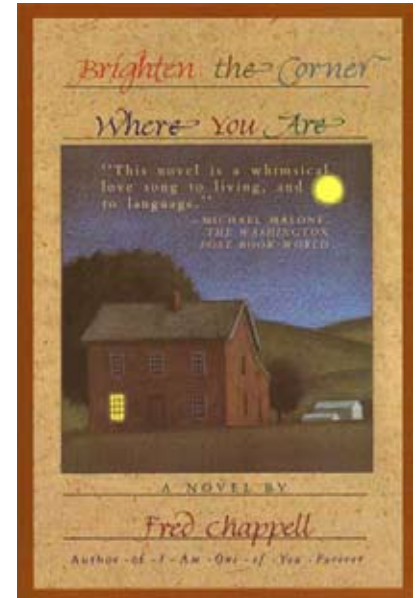




# Reading Group Gold

## Brighten the Corner Where You Are

by Fred Chappell



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### Introduction to *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*

Joe Robert Kirkman—imagined in all his quixotic glory and folly by his son Jess—negotiates many adventures, primarily at the North Carolina mountain high school at which he teaches science.

### Together We Read

“Together We Read” is a program in which all of Western North Carolina reads and discusses the same book—this year, Fred Chappell’s novel, “Brighten the Corner Where You Are.” Copies of the book are available at libraries and bookstores throughout the region.

The kick-off program, featuring Fred Chappell, takes place in Ferguson Auditorium, A-B Tech Community College, Sun., Sept. 21, 2 p.m. Other major programs will be hosted by Western Carolina University in mid-October; and Asheville-Buncombe Library System in mid-November. Book discussions are already starting up. Visit the website at [www.main.nc.us/twr/](http://www.main.nc.us/twr/) for more information.

“Together We Read” is funded by Glad Tithings Foundation; the North Carolina Humanities Council, a state-based program of the National Endowment for the Humanities; and four co-sponsors—Asheville-Buncombe Library System, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Mountain Area Information Network, and Western Carolina University.

### Author Biography

Fred Chappell was born May 28, 1936 in Canton, North Carolina to James Taylor Chappell, farmer, inventor, teacher, and furniture retailer; and Ann Davis, a school teacher. He married Susan Nicholls on August 2, 1959, and they have one son, Heath. Chappell received his B.A. and M.A. from Duke University. He is currently Creative Writing Professor at UNC-Greensboro and a major figure in North Carolina literature, a state famous for its supportive writers’ network.

Reviews of Chappell’s work have recognized the world-class nature of his brew of mountain wit and classic themes. He has been awarded many distinctions. See inside for a list of his books and awards.



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## Childhood Magic

Chappell's parents, both school teachers, provided him with a house of books. As a youth, Chappell, like Jess, his fictional alter ego, often escaped to enter worlds revealed through reading.

"I remembered when I first read Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Snow Queen,'" Chappell recounted. "It was an old, musty book with small print that I'd found in the attic of my grandmother's house. I started that story at 10:30 in the morning and I didn't look up until long past dark. I missed all my chores. I came downstairs and got a scolding—came near to getting a licking. It didn't mean much. I was still in Hans Christian Andersen's world. The world I was physically living in seemed less real than that.

"Sometimes when I'm writing, that same sensation comes over me," Chappell added. "It's better than telephones and cat litter."

## Quartet of Novels

*Brighten the Corner Where You Are* is the second novel in a quartet that begins with "I Am One of Your Forever," continues with "Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You," and concludes with "Look Back All the Green Valley." The titles refer to songs familiar in Southern Appalachian culture. They reflect one of the more ambitious aims of Chappell's writing.

"I had hoped that by constructing a fictional autobiography of a young man coming out of an Appalachian rural life to a broader intellectual one," Chappell revealed, "that I shall have drawn the story and dramatized the feelings of a great many people in 20th century America, who have had to bid farewell to a pastoral background."

When, in *Brighten the Corner*, Joe Robert Kirkman is challenged for teaching evolutionary theory in class, the issue is respectfully subjected to a rural mountain perspective. Joe Robert professes, in his Mark Twain way, that "man seemed to be trying to evolve into an animal as nice as a monkey, with an embarrassing lack of success." Yet, Chappell also has him doubting his scientific smugness. The fact is, Joe Robert admires such native hardscrabble farmers as Ginny and Pruitt Dorson, whose suicidal son had attended to him. The Dorsons suspect that modern man's meddling and pride have mucked things up.

In a brilliant chapter titled, "Socrates," Chappell transforms a stuttering country boy into a classroom star as he takes on the role of Socrates and leads Joe Robert into exposing his own hypocrisy. Repeatedly, Chappell's hero's virtues lead to his humbling.

## Storytelling

If there's a teacher who has not read *Brighten the Corner*, the joy police should pull his or her file. The novel's lessons go beyond the classroom, however, and, as Chappell has indicated, involve an interest in Appalachian values, one of which is the value of storytelling.



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In Chappell's works, storytelling performs the widest possible range of functions—recreation, instruction, healing, courtship, persuasion, religious enlightenment, the preservation of tradition, and the binding of family and community. Literature is communal and priestly.

In his first Kirkman novel, "I Am One of You Forever," Chappell epitomizes a mountain storyteller in the person of Jess's Uncle Zeno, whose "stories so thoroughly absorbed the characters he spoke of that they took leave of the everyday world and just went off to inhabit his narratives." Uncle Zeno's discursive, mesmerizing renditions made Jess's father so obnoxiously envious that Zeno eventually incorporated him into one of his stories—an occult threat. It's not surprising to learn that Chappell's first efforts at fiction writing had been in the realm of science fiction. That was partly because, Chappell said, "it seemed that science fiction was something I could write. It didn't require experience of the world, and editors seemed to be encouraging."

## Poetry

Chappell's first love? It was poetry, and still is. It has made him the Jack Nicholson of poetry-writing award-winners, and led to his being named North Carolina's Poet Laureate in 1997.

Chappell's books of poems about local and personal mythology, four volumes combined in 1981 into the masterwork, "Midquest," complement his fictional Kirkman quartet. They resolve what has always been, for Chappell, a conflict between two forms of expression.

When Chappell had broken into publication in 1964 with the novel, "It is Time, Lord," a Gothic tale about a young man ensnared by self-delusion, it had not been his literary preference. It had been an attempt to make some money and the result of a fateful quirk.

"In 1961," Chappell says, "I went to Duke University and became editor of its literary magazine, 'The Archive.' One issue required that I fill up a blank page, so I wrote a short story. Duke had a literary festival, and invited New York editors to comment on student work. Hiram Haydn, editor at Atheneum Books, liked my one-page story and asked me to submit a novel. I said, 'No thanks, I'm a poet. I don't care to soil my spirit.' That summer, I ran out of money and wrote Haydn and said, 'I enclose the first chapter of a novel.' He sent me 250 dollars, one quarter of an advance."

Chappell's latest book, "Family Gathering," a collection of poems about guests at a family function, brilliantly composes stories as verse, achieving his dual purpose. Music is important to Chappell. He concluded two of his Kirkman novels with music—"Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You" with the folk song memories of Jess's dying grandmother; and "Look Back All the Green Valley" with fiddling at Jess's father's funeral.

## Imagination

*Brighten the Corner Where You Are* is not quite as music-filled as Chappell's other Kirkman novels, but it does revel in the kind of symbolism that Chappell strove to include in his first three books. In fact, the book



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starts out with the grandest of symbols—Joe Robert reaching for the moon. Jess witnesses his father lift the moon from its reflection in a barn window and drop it in a milk bucket. Later, Joe Robert’s mother-in-law prevails upon him to return it to the sky.

“I often make a metaphor literal,” Chappell says. “What we imagine is real. Everything we have done is a product of our imagination.”

“The experiences of talking to tornadoes and ghosts,” Chappell says, referring to episodes in his books, “have happened to many people. The people who have experienced these things believed they happened. The New York Times did not send out a reporter to Moses to say, ‘Are you sure it was a bush you heard speaking?’ In Asheville, I can go out on the streets and find you people who believe the moon landing had been a hoax. I can find you even more people who plant by the signs.”

One of the pieces of advice that Chappell gives to people who want to write family stories in memorable and meaningful ways is to seek not only the literal truth but also the greater truth. “Kids will want to put down the facts,” he says of the story writing initiative of “Together We Read.” “But,” he stresses, “they’re not after the facts. They’re after the truth. When they don’t know something, they should make it up.” He also suggests connecting to sensual details—for instance, recollecting smells of past times and comparing them to smells today.

*A version of this article, written by Rob Neufeld, was published in the Asheville Citizen-Times, May 18, 2003.*

## Books by Fred Chappell

### The early, symbolic Southern Gothic novels

It is Time Lord (Atheneum, 1963; LSU, 1996)

The Inkling (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1965; LSU, 1998)

Dagon (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968; LSU, 2002)—winner of the French Academy’s prize for best foreign work of literature

### Short story collections

Moments of Light (New South Co., 1980)

More Shapes than One (St. Martin’s, 1991)

The Asheville novel

The Gaudy Place (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich 1973; LSU, 1994)—winner of the Sir Walter Raleigh Award



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## Collections of poems

The World between the Eyes (LSU Press, 1971)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

Awakening to Music (Briarpatch Press, 1979)

Source (LSU Press, 1986)

First and Last Words (LSU Press, 1989)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

C: Poems (LSU Press, 1993)

Spring Garden (LSU Press, 1995)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

A New Pléiade: Selected Poems (LSU Press, 1998)

Family Gathering (LSU Press, 2000)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

## The quartet of books of mountain poems

River (LSU, 1975)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

Bloodfire (LSU Press, 1978)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

Wind Mountain (LSU, 1979)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

Earthsleep (LSU, 1980)

The four have been published in a single volume titled Midquest (LSU, 1981)

## The legend poem

Castle Tzingal (LSU, 1984)—winner of the Roanoke-Chowan Poetry Cup

## The autobiographical quartet of novels

I Am One of You Forever (LSU, 1985)

*Brighten the Corner Where You Are* (St. Martin's, 1989)

Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You (Picador, 1996)

Look Back All the Green Valley (Picador, 1999)

## Books of criticism

Plow Naked: Selected Writings on Poetry (U. of Michigan Press, 1993)

A Way of Happening: Observations of Contemporary Poetry (Picador, 1998)

## Omnibus

The Fred Chappell Reader (St. Martin's Press, 1987)

## Edited Anthology

Locales: Poems from the Fellowship of Southern Writers (LSU, 2003)

## Awards Received by Fred Chappell (*other than those for specific books*)

- Rockefeller Foundation Grant, 1966
- National Institute and American Academy Awards in
- Literature, 1968
- Yale University's Bollingen Prize for Poetry, 1985



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- O. Max Gardner Award, the highest teaching award bestowed by the University of North Carolina, 1987
- Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry, presented by the Sewanee Review, 1996
- North Carolina Poet Laureate, 1997

## *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*

### CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER SUMMARY

MOON (an italicized, unnumbered chapter). Jess, a boy, witnesses his father capture the moon and then, at his grandmother's insistence, return it to the sky.

One: THE DEVIL-POSSUM. Joe Robert Kirkman tries to convince his fellow outdoorsmen about the existence of a fabulous beast. When their dogs are heard making a fearful noise, he is forced to investigate, and, climbing a tree, comes face-to-face with a bobcat.

Two: MORNING ABLUTIONS. Joe Robert returns home bruised on the day of his meeting with the school board. He performs early morning farm chores and then, on the way to work, rescues a drowning girl.

Three: MEDAL OF HONOR. Reporting to the principal's office, expecting a reprimand, Joe Robert instead is greeted by the parents of a former student, a country boy who had committed suicide after returning from Vietnam. The parents bestow one of their son's medals on Joe Robert.

Four: GENERAL SCIENCE. Joe Robert teaches his class about issues in evolution.

Five: THE REHEARSAL. Joe Robert and his teaching crony, Sandy, rehearse for Joe Robert's meeting with the school board that afternoon.

SHARES (an italicized, unnumbered chapter). Jess recalls fighting the son of his father's resentful tenant farmer.

Six: THE MEMORIAL. In a hidden part of the school basement, Joe Robert discovers the hidey-hole of Jubal Henry, the custodian. Jubal has created, on the wall behind his work desk, a collage of photos and articles about the community's war dead. Joe Robert seeks Jubal's wisdom and is offered an initiation into mysteries that are beyond his rational comprehension.

Seven: BACCHUS. Joe Robert aids students in capturing a goat on the loose and ends up negotiating with the intelligent animal atop a roof.

Eight: SOCRATES. Joe Robert has his students perform a role-play in which one student assumes the identity of Socrates. A shy country boy rises to the occasion, and subsequently punctures Joe Robert's presumptions about teaching Darwinism in a conservative community.





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Nine: *PROMETHEUS UNBOUND*. Joe Robert makes a puzzling visit to a special school board meeting.

Ten: *FOXFIRE*. Joe Robert is informed that the governor wants him to serve on an educational commission. Later, he learns that his best student, Janie Forbes, is planning to settle down early with a husband and family.

*DARWIN* (an italicized, unnumbered chapter). Joe Robert dreams of defending Charles Darwin, who is sentenced to be hanged, and is tripped up by his own low opinion of mankind.

## Discussion Questions

NOTE: The following questions are divided into categories for four different types of audiences— general readers, students, scholars, and writers. A few questions appear in two of the sections. The categories are to make your use of this guide easier, but certainly, feel free to look at all of the questions to determine which ones you want to use for your group.

### Questions for General Readers

1. Chappell chooses to start his story with an initiation. Into what realms is the boy, Jess, being initiated by his father?
2. At what point in the novel do you begin to get a specific sense of place—the mountains—Southern Appalachia—Haywood County?
3. After being introduced to the hero-philosopher-clown in the first chapter, you may be so in love with him that you want to see him keep clowning forever. Or there may be non-comic attitudes that you wish he'd demonstrate. If so, what? See if any of these other attitudes are fulfilled later in the book.
4. "My father had declared eternal war on custom," the narrator says. What are other principles that guide Joe Robert's life? Society features so many customs, declaring war on them yields a wealth of good plot lines. Do other principles create as many interesting situations?
5. What do you make of Jess, the young narrator, knowing his father's private thoughts and out-of-earshot words?
6. Joe Robert believes that "God was something of a windbag, continually talking to mankind, but pitching His discourse beyond our abbreviated human capacities. His method was the optimistic, and God lost most of his audience." (page 34) Satire is a rather gentle form of persuasion. What is Chappell trying to persuade you of here? How familiar are you with satire? Has the use of it declined?
7. Jess says that he never waked ever in his life, but dreamed of his father as a mythological hero. Someday, Jess thought, he'd carry his father as Aeneas did his (in Virgil's Roman epic) "to the shores of the future." Are you familiar with the reference to the Aenead? Do you read the classics? If not, are you inspired to do



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so? Are the heroes of past ages relevant today?

8. What kind of role model is Joe Robert for his son? Is Jess going to be handicapped in any way because of his upbringing? What is his father's fate, do you think? (The answers to these questions are answered in the fourth book of the Kirkman quarter, *Look Back All the Green Valley*.)

9. In how many ways is storytelling important to our lives? Here's an instance. While Virg Campbell and Joe Robert are making efforts to revive a drowning girl, Virg starts telling a silly story about a rabbit-hunting tourist. "It seemed a fitting time for a windy," Joe Robert thinks. How so? Does storytelling act like magic? How so in your actual experience?

10. Are there any stories in *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* that you would be inclined to retell to friends?

11. If someone were to say you were acting "Kirkmanic," what would they mean?

12. *Brighten the Corner* contains references to other volumes in Chappell's Kirkman quartet—for example, the Bound for Hell Grocery and Dry Goods Store (p. 42), Johnson Gibbs, the war casualty (p. 60), Joe Robert's courtship with Cora (p. 96); Joe Robert's mother-in-law, as sharp as Clarence Darrow (p. 97); and more. Are you eager to read the other volumes? Are you caught up with the Kirkman family?

13. Compare Joe Robert to the Music Man. See page 52, where he says, "We got real trouble here."

14. Look back at question 3, which considers Joe Robert's potential for non-comic attitudes. Now look at the story about Lewis Dorson, the quiet mountain boy who came home a decorated soldier and ended up killing himself in Detroit. What are the themes that elicit Joe Robert's piety?

15. What are the virtues of a traditional, rural mountain family? (See page 62.)

16. Pruitt Dorson suspects that it was his son's book learning and not just the war that had hurt his son. Pruitt himself only reads the Bible. Maybe education "was not the cure but the disease," Kirkman concedes. Do you agree?

17. What does *Brighten the Corner* have to say about the teaching profession—about teacher morale (p. 51); the need for hand-on learning and good equipment (p. 68); memory aids (p. 74); the conflict between telling the truth and maintaining job security (pp. 91, 95); role-playing (p. 152); and Socratic dialogue (p. 159)?

18. Joe Robert, teaching science, takes the issue of Creationism head on. (p. 69) Would he get in trouble in certain schools for what he says?

19. Do you practice self-effacement? Can it be practiced in such a way that you can be taken seriously and yet not be considered superior? When and how does Kirkman do it?

20. In the primarily White mountain population of *Brighten the Corner*, Chappell gets to portray one Afri-





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can-American, Jubal Henry, the wise school custodian. Although one portrait can never stand for an entire race, how does Jubal reflect on African-Americans?

21. Does Joe Robert meet his match or more than his match in Jubal Henry? Joe Robert has his truthstretchers and diplomatic banter. What does Jubal have? What does he mean when he tells Joe Robert, “I am foretelling there is a hubcap on the table with cigar butts in it”; and then that the little plywood partition in the boiler room holds up the whole school. (p. 127)

22. How does the goal of being a wise man or woman fare among other goals in society? Are there such people as wise ones? Is Joe Robert one? Is it proper for a wise man to be foolish and even dense sometimes? See page 128.

23. Why does the Bacchus story take the turn it does at the end—when the goat talks and makes an amorous remark to Joe Robert?

24. As the “Socrates” chapter asks, “Is it of supreme importance” that the students of Tipton “should be conversant with contemporary scientific thought?” (p. 161) Does the truthfulness of science depend upon current (and changeable) trends in thinking? (p. 163) Might Darwin’s theory of evolution one day be overturned? (p. 164) Does Scotty-as-Socrates misstate Socrates’ opinion about Joe Robert’s teaching methods. Do Joe Robert and Scotty make missteps in their discussion?

25. Why did Joe Robert misjudge the reactions of the school board so badly?

26. The governor’s representative is happy to have Joe Robert’s feat of saving a drowning girl “rise in status” in newspaper reports—for political reasons. (p. 190) To what extent are we all tall tale tellers? Where and when do we draw the line between telling things exactly as they are and making changes to improve the story? When is such story-making a “lie” and when enhanced truth?

27. What kind of a process does Joe Robert go through at the end? He quits his job, becomes disillusioned with Socrates, dismisses the honor bestowed on him by the governor, and learns of his favorite student’s abdication of an academic career. Then he decides he’s going to be a farmer and deal directly with the world. What’s up? How do you feel about all this?

28. Why does Chappell make Janie Forbes one of the most prominent characters?

29. What is the “joke” that Joe Robert thinks he tells his wife at the end?

30. The last line in *Brighten the Corner* refers to Jess’s mother, who, lying next to her husband in bed, dreams her own dreams, “pursuing her own exotic life.” (p. 212) Why does Chappell end his book this way? Are there alternate endings, or is this the perfect one?

31. Is Joe Robert Kirkman a throwback? Who are the throwback characters in our world? Are they mainly romantic and appealing characters, or are they potentially effective ones?



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32. What does Joe Robert mean by calling himself a “liar”? His friends call him that, too. It seems to be a compliment. Would you ever call yourself that? What does Joe Robert achieve by using the word?

33. What does Southern Appalachian literature and Fred Chappell in particular have to show the world about storytelling?

## Questions for Students

1. Chappell chooses to start his story with an initiation. Into what realms is the boy, Jess, being initiated by his father?

2. From what kind of tellers and situations do tall tales originate?

3. Study physical comedy, such as the episode in which Joe Robert climbs the tree in pursuit of the devil-possum. What do you notice? How does Chappell make the flow and focus of the story ape the hero's state of mind? Do you like it when Joe Robert philosophizes in the middle of the crisis?

4. Chappell mixes mythological, literary, slang, and pop language. Read a few different pages at random. Note the different sources of his vocabulary.

5. See Joe Robert's philosophy on page 35 of “*Brighten the Corner*.” How does it compare with your philosophy? Do you have a philosophy?

6. What are the virtues of a traditional, rural mountain family? (See page 62.)

7. Pruitt Dorson suspects that it was his son's book learning and not just the war that had hurt his son. Pruitt himself only reads the Bible. Maybe education “was not the cure but the disease,” Kirkman concedes. Do you agree?

8. What are the best ways to teach history? See Kirkman's lecture on Tilgath Pilesen on page 72. What have been the most entertaining history lessons you've heard and seen?

9. Joe Robert makes a hero of William Buckland, the world's first geologist and dinosaur-namer. What makes Buckland a hero in Kirkman's mind?

10. How successfully does Chappell extend his interest in folk ways to the custodian's memorial collage? How would you rate the collage as a work of art? Would you hang it in a museum? Would you use it as a model to create your own work?

11. Characters enter magical worlds in many ways in fiction: psychologically, fantastically, through extreme adventures, and allegorically. What is it that is happening in the boiler room when Joe Robert Kirkman turns the lantern out on Jubal Henry and then finds himself alone in an Arctic region? See p. 130.

12. The governor's representative is happy to have Joe Robert's feat of saving a drowning girl “rise in status”



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in newspaper reports—for political reasons. (p. 190) To what extent are we all tall tale tellers? Where and when do we draw the line between telling things exactly as they are and making changes to improve the story? When is such story-making a “lie” and when enhanced truth?

13. In Chappell’s fourth book in the Kirkman quartet, “Look Back All the Green Valley,” Jess calls his father the “classic folklore trickster.” What do you know about the trickster tradition (Br’er Rabbit, the fox in various guises, Anansi the spider, etc.)? If you were to compile the trickster tales from “*Brighten the Corner*?” in fable-sized form, which episodes would you include? What forms do trickster tales take? Some tricksters are often mean-spirited. Is Joe Robert ever? What might you do in your life to be a good trickster?

## Questions for Scholars

1. How is Joe Robert Kirkman both an outsider and an insider in his society? Are there clues here about how to be different from a crowd and yet be embraced by it?
2. Study physical comedy, such as the episode in which Joe Robert climbs the tree in pursuit of the devil-possum. What do you notice? How does Chappell make the flow and focus of the story ape the hero’s state of mind? Do you like it when Joe Robert philosophizes in the middle of the crisis? How is it possible for a character to be both superior and inferior to his peers?
3. Joe Robert believes that “God was something of a windbag, continually talking to mankind, but pitching His discourse beyond our abbreviated human capacities. His method was the optimistic, and God lost most of his audience.” (page 34) Satire is a rather gentle form of persuasion. What is Chappell trying to persuade you of here? How familiar are you with satire? Has the use of it declined?
4. “There was a streak of the philosopher in him,” Chappell writes of Joe Robert Kirkman, “of William James, perhaps, or Harpo Marx.” (page 51) What is the tradition of the philosopher-clown? What wise men have incorporated humor, pranks, and riddles into their teaching? How does Joe Robert relate to them?
5. What does *Brighten the Corner* have to say about the teaching profession—about teacher morale (p. 51); the need for hand-on learning and good equipment (p. 68); memory aids (p. 74); the conflict between telling the truth and maintaining job security (pp. 91, 95); role-playing (p. 152); and Socratic dialogue (p. 159)?
6. Compare Fred Chappell’s in-some-ways dark view of humanity to Mark Twain’s. See p. 70: “Man seemed to be trying to evolve into an animal as nice as a monkey, with an embarrassing lack of success.” Mark Twain had once compared mankind to bacteria—a scourge, from the point of view of the non-human world. And yet Chappell and Twain are generally well-loved. How do they manage it?
7. What are the best ways to teach history? See Kirkman’s lecture on Tilgath Pilesen on page 72. What have been the most entertaining history lessons you’ve heard and seen?
8. Joe Robert suggests to his colleague, Sandy, that even Sandy’s subject, math, is controversial if taught truthfully. Is this true of all subjects? Is the truth too dangerous for secondary school education?



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9. Compared to other authors, to what extent is Chappell concerned about issues of social class? What perspective does Jess portray in relation to the tenant farmers in the section, “Shares”? Is there a bias? What about Joe Robert in regard to the African-American custodian, Jubal Henry? (See page 123.)
10. What type of imagery keeps cropping up in *Brighten the Corner*? In other words, what is Chappell’s thematic vocabulary? When you put all of the types of imagery together, what picture does it give you of Chappell’s fictional universe?
11. Why does Joe Robert suggest that Billy Joe Pressman, a student, would find life anti-climactic after the goat-on-the-roof episode and, “disappointed with his late colorless years,” would “wind up as a dope fiend or a literary critic”? (139)
12. As the “Socrates” chapter asks, “Is it of supreme importance” that the students of Tipton “should be conversant with contemporary scientific thought?” (p. 161) Does the truthfulness of science depend upon current (and changeable) trends in thinking? (p. 163) Might Darwin’s theory of evolution one day be overturned? (p. 164) Does Scotty-as-Socrates misstate Socrates’ opinion about Joe Robert’s teaching methods. Do Joe Robert and Scotty make missteps in their discussion?
13. What does Southern Appalachian literature and Fred Chappell in particular have to show the world about storytelling?

## Questions for Writers

1. Chappell’s pages are full of metaphors. Do you like it? Look at one of Chappell’s metaphors and compare it to an adjective that might have been used instead. Examine adjectives in your own writing and consider using metaphors as alternatives. Note that Chappell’s metaphors are born of his characters’ experiences, and are not inserted clichés.
2. How do you fashion a tall tale? Try following the model on pages 11 to 12 of *Brighten the Corner*, which takes the form, “My dog is so mean...” It’s important that the thing you’re describing is part of your experience. The hunters in Chappell’s story know all about dogs, for instance. A student in public school might write about the unluckiest student, and get into lost homework stories.
3. Much of the Devil-Possum chapter works like a play for the stage—with a lot of dialogue. What are the dynamics of this scene, which is lively despite it being physically static? Try enacting it.
4. “My father had declared eternal war on custom,” the narrator says. What are other principles that guide Joe Robert’s life? Society features so many customs, declaring war on them yields a wealth of good plot lines. Do other principles create as many interesting situations?
5. How successful is Joe Robert (and thus Chappell) in creating a local mythology, including the Devil-Possum, the Ungodly Terror, Bacchus the goat, the custodian’s underworld? What might you consider to be the elements of a mythology in any of your worlds?



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6. Study comic writers and stand-up comedians for comic style, and compare to Chappell. For example, Kirkman's account of teachers' ingrown behavior (page 51, paragraph 3) is a list that won't quit—and resembles one of David Letterman's techniques. See "Roy Blount's Book of Southern Humor."
7. Does the students' involvement in scientific song and dance at the end of chapter four lessen the believability of the spirited lesson? Is believability the point? Is the chapter a stage piece?
8. Unlike the old knights' tales, *Brighten the Corner* is not simply episodic. In what ways does it circle around, diverge, and weave?
9. Do you find it surprising that Chappell can create an environment of mythological passages in a public school? What are the mythological elements in *Brighten the Corner*? Take into account Joe Robert's movements (for example, the school underworld and upper level pantheon). Can you imagine such a mythology taking place in one of your environments?
10. The last line in *Brighten the Corner* refers to Jess's mother, who, lying next to her husband in bed, dreams her own dreams, "pursuing her own exotic life." (p. 212) Why does Chappell end his book this way? Are there alternate endings, or is this the perfect one?
11. In Chappell's fourth book in the Kirkman quartet, "Look Back All the Green Valley," Jess calls his father the "classic folklore trickster." What do you know about the trickster tradition (Br'er Rabbit, the fox in various guises, Anansi the spider, etc.)? If you were to compile the trickster tales from "Brighten the Corner?" in fable-sized form, which episodes would you include? What forms do trickster tales take? Some tricksters are often mean-spirited. Is Joe Robert ever?