



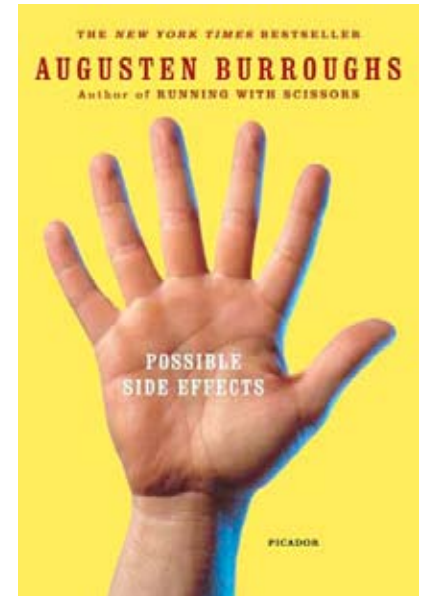
Reading Group Gold

Possible Side Effects

by Augusten Burroughs

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Possible Side Effects* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Possible Side Effects*.



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About the Book

From the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Running with Scissors* comes Augusten Burroughs's most provocative collection of true stories yet. From Nicorette addiction to lesbian personal ads to incontinent dogs, *Possible Side Effects* mines Burroughs's life in a series of uproariously funny essays. These are stories that are ubiquitously Augusten, with all the over-the-top hilarity of *Running with Scissors*, the erudition of *Dry*, and the breadth of *Magical Thinking*.

A collection that is universal in its appeal and unabashedly intimate, *Possible Side Effects* continues to explore that which is most personal, mirthful, disturbing and cherished, with unmatched audacity. A cautionary tale in essay form, be forewarned—hilarious, troubling, and shocking results might occur.

“Oh, that boy is trouble. Augusten Burroughs offers more tales of his dysfunctional family and his ill-fated forays into polite society in his outrageously funny new collection of essays, *Possible Side Effects*. . . . Tart, smart, and wicked fun.” —*O, The Oprah Magazine*

“Burroughs's twisted nature has an immediate appeal. . . . He's the mildly demented distant relative whose junk-food binges, spiteful fantasies and kleptomaniac tendencies appeal to our suppressed dark side while allowing us to maintain a sense of superiority. And he deadpans like a champion.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

“[A] unique and humorous perspective on life's twists and turns . . . Burroughs comically documents his diverse experiences, from childhood and adulthood, using aspects of his character--his social isolation, slovenliness and imagination, to name just a few--to plump the material.” —*Daily News* (New York)



Reading Group Gold

“His ruminations on everything from Nicorette gum, the BBC, pornography, and his messed-up childhood with a delusional manic-depressive mother read like a darker, hipper David Sedaris. . . . A funny, sharp and totally enjoyable read.” —*Jane magazine*

“The primary reason for reading the essays in *Possible Side Effects* is to enjoy the sound of [Burroughs’s] rueful, funny, faintly sulky voice. . . . This is a book by someone who understands the frailty and absurdity of the human condition.” —*The Washington Post*

About the Author

Augusten Burroughs is the # 1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Running with Scissors*, *Magical Thinking*, *Dry*, and *Sellelevision*. He lives in New York City and Massachusetts.

Discussion Questions

1. In her *New York Times* review of *Possible Side Effects*, Janet Maslin writes that “somewhere along the way to his fourth autobiographical volume, Augusten Burroughs changed from a guy with a story to tell into a guy with a knack for telling stories.” What do you think she means? Do you agree? What makes a good storyteller? Can you name any other writers with a similar talent for making the incidental interesting and/or humorous?
2. As the twenty-five essays in *Possible Side Effects* shift back and forth in time, how are Burroughs’ preoccupations different before and after becoming a famous writer? In what ways are they the same?
3. On page 20, Burroughs’ writes: “I am prone to envy. It is one of my three default emotions, the others being greed and rage. I have also experienced compassion and generosity, but only fleetingly and usually while drunk, so I have little memory.” Do you think Burroughs is being completely serious? How might essays like “Killing John Updike” and “Little Crucifixions” both prove and refute Burroughs’ statement? Why is Burroughs’s self- assessment both striking and funny?
4. “Many people assume I have a ‘funny and charming’ self,” Burroughs states in his essay “Team Player” after being invited to speak publicly at colleges and universities. “Many people are wrong” [p 36]. Does this confession surprise you? Where do you think it would be most fun to hang out with Burroughs: a redneck rodeo, a Jean Paul Gautier fashion show, or the Westminster dog show? Why? What, if anything, do you think you can know about a writer’s personality from his or her work?
5. Considering the essays “The Sacred Cow,” “Fetch” and “Kitty Kitty,” how does Burroughs view dogs? If you have pets, would you trust them with him? What about his brother? Why do you think some people find the company of animals preferable to humans?
6. Based on “GWF Seeks Same” and “Getting to No You,” do you think Burroughs would make a good host



Reading Group Gold

of a reality television dating show? When placing an internet ad, about what do you think it is most acceptable to lie: age, weight or income? Who do you think has the best odds when it comes to internet dating: men, women, gays or straights?

7. Reviewing his pre-celebrity resume in the essays “Mint Threshold,” “Taking Tests, Taking Things,” “Unclear Sailing,” and “Druggie Debbie,” what do you think would have become of Burroughs had he never become a successful writer? Do you he would have returned to advertising and become a bitter alcoholic, taken to the streets and become boozed-out beggar, or carved out a sober and rewarding career in some other profession?

8. Recalling his experiences in “Attacked by Heart,” “The Wisdom Tooth,” “Peep,” “You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby,” and “Little Crucifixions,” with which of Burroughs’ numerous compulsions and neuroses do you most identify? Do you think being a celebrity allows you to get away with being more eccentric? Why? If you were a celebrity, what eccentricity would you like to cultivate?

9. Do “Try Our New Single, Black Mother Menu” and “Mrs. Chang” reinforce or challenge stereotypes? Why? Do you think it’s possible to talk honestly and humorously about race and not offend anyone? How do some food or retail chains in your area cater to certain demographics?

10. In “Pest Control” and “The Georgia Thumper,” how does Burroughs view his two grandmothers? If you could magically make any of your relatives disappear, would you? Which ones? Can you recall any non-relatives you knew while growing that you wished were part of your family? Why?

11. How does Burroughs use humor to address the subject of mental illness in “The Forecast for Sommer,” “The Wonder Boy,” and “Julia’s Child”? Does finding the comedy in such situations make those stories more accessible and emotionally affecting to readers? Why? Do you think “Julia’s Child” is a good essay with which to end the book?