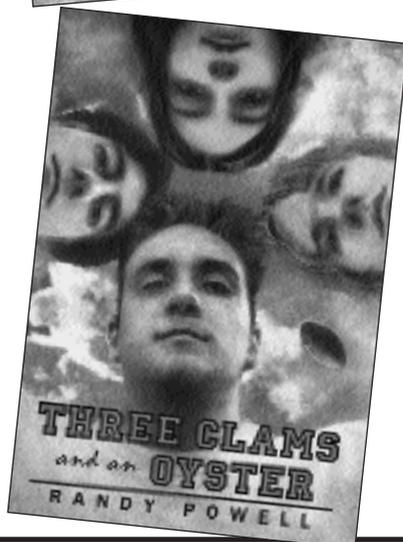
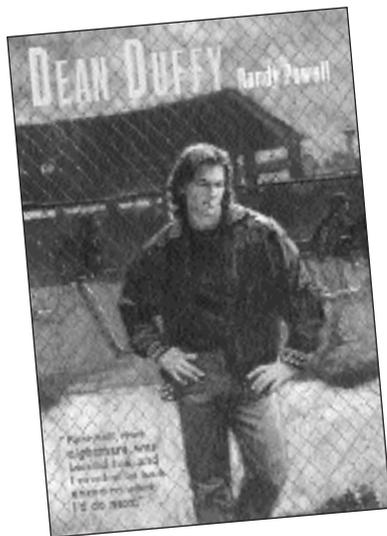


*Teachers' Guide*

---

# The Novels of Randy Powell



The young adult novels of Randy Powell crackle with the authentic voices of guys just horsing around together. His ear is impeccable, and reviewers have often praised his sharp and funny dialogue. His characters, both teens and adults, are real humans, complex and lovable, with flaws and aspirations. Often quirky, they are always achingly true to life. Powell's engrossing stories center around a crucial decision that must be made, a ticking clock, a young life in danger of sliding out of control. Powell speaks convincingly to boys about the turbulent times leading up to the moment of truth that makes a man, and although his protagonists are always male, there are plenty of interesting outspoken and independent female characters who have problems of their own.

Powell's novels are not traditional sports stories, although they are full of athletic competition: tennis, baseball, golf, running, flag football, bowling – even Ping-Pong, pinball games, and chess. His Seattle settings reflect the city's sophisticated coffee-and-grunge culture, set against a background of spectacular mountains and forests and sea views, and also evoke the attitudes of a city where carrying an umbrella is seen as wimpiness and people walk around with dripping hair, damp jackets, and squelchy shoes.

In addition to his great dialogue and suspenseful, very real plots, Powell has a genius for heartwarming romantic comedy. In every book he shows teens the joy of discovering a member of the opposite sex with whom you can talk comfortably, say anything, goof around, and be accepted for who you are.

Randy Powell's young adult novels are great fun to read, but at the same time they speak with compassion and understanding about things that matter to young hearts and minds.

The questions that follow can be used as writing prompts or for sparking lively talk in a book club or reading group, or simply for helping a solitary reader explore more deeply the characters and issues in these engrossing and often very funny young adult novels.

## **About *Dean Duffy***

---

Two years ago, Dean Duffy, 17, was on top of the world, a national baseball star with a certainty of college scholarships. Now he can't pitch, can't hit, and has graduated from high school a loser. When Dean is offered a last chance at baseball and college and a free but temporary apartment in the University District of Seattle in which to make up his mind to accept the last chance, he must face the choice – and himself.

## **Discussion Questions for *Dean Duffy***

---

- What exactly are Dean's two choices, in his own words? Is his view too narrow? What other choices, both good and bad, could there be?
- Dean's temporary living situation is every teen's dream: "*a furnished bachelor pad right in the heart of the U. District – and no school.*" [p. 49] What would you do with your

days in a setup like this? How long would you want to live that way?

■ Imagine a circle of chairs in which Jack Trant, Stewart Pitts, Karin, Ruta Waterfall, Pete Woods, and J. L. Bean are sitting. In the middle is Dean. Write, act out, or just imagine a dialogue in which each of them offers advice to Dean to help him make up his mind. Use their actual words as much as you can. To end the dialogue, find the one sentence that comes to Dean and sums it all up when he is on the muddy slope.

■ What is the attraction between Dean and Karin, and why do they become good friends but not lovers? Karin says, “*I guess everybody’s waiting for something.*” [p. 99] Is this true? What is Karin waiting for? Dean says, “*We waited for whatever was meant to happen in our lives to happen.*” [p. 123] Is simply waiting enough?

■ The last words of the novel are said by Dick Drago as he holds out the letter of intent: “*Decision time. What’s it going to be, Mr. Duffy? Yes or no? What’s it going to be?*” [p. 170] What do you think Dean has decided? Why? What would be a good literary term for books that leave the ending open? Do you find this annoying or intriguing?

## About *Is Kissing a Girl Who Smokes Like Licking an Ashtray?*

Shy Biff, 18, has adored Tommie from afar for twenty-three months, but can’t get up his nerve to approach her. In the meantime, family friends get him involved with brash, quirky Heidi, who in one long, intense weekend turns his life around – and hers.

## Discussion Questions for *Is Kissing a Girl Who Smokes Like Licking an Ashtray?*

■ One of the pleasures of this novel is gradually getting to know Heidi in all her complexity. In the early chapters, other characters refer to her as bratty, smart as a whip, an airhead, snotty, dumb, shallow, smug, and a raging beast without a trace of manners. Later she might also be called mean, angry, hurting, sad, funny, sensitive, and compassionate. Pick two descriptions that you feel are accurate, one from each list, and defend your choices with examples from the book. Of all the annoying things Heidi does, which would you find most irritating?

■ Faced with the temptation of a pinball machine, Biff muses, “*What strange things we do to ourselves. Amusements, habits, obsessions.*” [p.157] His is pinball. What is Heidi’s? Her father’s? Why have they become addicted, and what are the destructive effects of their addictions on these three people? Why does Biff’s passion for pinball disturb Heidi so much? What other “amusements, habits, obsessions” have you seen in the people around you? In yourself?

■ After their first evening together, Biff decides that Heidi isn’t so bad. What is there about obnoxious Heidi in that first encounter that makes him feel this way? Later, why is Heidi so eager to hear about Biff’s crush? While in his room, why does she ask to see his yearbook? When Heidi marches up to Tommie’s door and rings the doorbell, she offers Biff an obvious lie to describe what happened. What really went on, according to Tommie later? Write or act out the scene as Biff would imagine it before he found out the truth.

■ Lynn tells Biff: “*You know what your problem is? . . . You won’t give anything of yourself.*” [p. 102] Is this true of Biff? Of most shy people? How does Biff try to overcome this

failing? What compassionate gesture does he withhold from Heidi that makes him feel that he has failed her? What does he do to make up for it? What other relationship benefits from Lynn's observation?

■ Is Biff's decision to drive Heidi to Spokane rather than go on the date with Tommie an indication that he has gotten over his crush? Or is the door open for him to explore both relationships? Which girl do you think is the better match for Biff?

## ***About Run If You Dare***

---

His dad has been out of work for quite a while and keeps promising to do something about it, but Gardner, 14, isn't worried. His mom has gone back to her old job in advertising and his big sister works long hours at a pizza place, but Gardner is his dad's buddy. He admires his father's hang-loose attitude that things will work out by themselves, until his dad's increasing misery makes Gardner realize that drifting is no way to live, and that it will ruin Gardner's life, too, unless he changes some things about himself that are too much like his father's.

## ***Discussion Questions for Run If You Dare***

---

■ By the end of the first chapter, we know a lot about Gardner's dad. What details reveal his character? How does Randy Powell communicate so much about Camden Dickinson and his relationship with his son without actually *telling* us? Compare the contents of the cluttered garage with what we later learn is in Gardner's room. What do these objects reveal about their owners? What does Gardner say about the clutter that underlines this?

■ "When a man sees something he wants, he should go for it" is one of Camden's expressions. How is this both true and untrue about the expensive golf club? About his life? What other "wise" sayings of his father does Gardner quote with admiration? Do you agree with any of them?

■ Why does Lacy's revelation to Gardner at the Thanksgiving party make him so angry? Earlier, he has begun to take charge of his life in small ways. What are some of his new actions, and what is responsible for his changed attitude? After his dad shames him by showing up on the PE field dressed like a bum, why is it so important to Gardner to win the race?

■ Camden declares, "*Dammit, I'm going to take what's left of my life and run with it.*" [p. 161] How does he intend to do this? Later Gardner says the same thing about himself, but with what very different meaning? What more does the title of the book add to this idea?

■ What is Gardner's final realization about his father, and how does he act on it? In the end, he wonders, "*Did it take more guts to stay and not run?*" [p. 165] Does it? Is Camden tragic or heroic?

## ***About Three Clams and an Oyster***

---

It's a four-man flag-football team: the three Clams — Flint, Beaterson, and Deshutsis — and the Oyster, odd-man-out Cade Savage. They've been friends since first grade, but now Cade is messing up big-time, and they're going to have to dump him and find a replacement right away, before the season starts. And the best candidate — and maybe the only real candidate — is Rachel Summerfield. The Clams' desperate search for an alternative to facing the gender issue is real, touching — and very funny.

## Discussion Questions for *Three Clams and an Oyster*

■ Why has it been so hard for the Clams to search for a fifth team member after Glen's death? What was Glen's role in their group? How did Cade fit in then, and how does he fit in now? In spite of Flint's righteous anger at Cade, why is Flint so willing to find excuses for their Oyster's infuriating behavior?

■ The Clams are very big on tradition and ritual. What does this tell us about the group? Flint says, "*This weekend, we've run away from pretty much everything new and different that's come along.*" [p. 155] What are some of the things they've run away from, and why?

■ Commenting on why the three Clams don't drink, Flint says, "*This avoidance of alcohol no doubt gets in the way of our growing up and becoming men.*" [p. 58] Does he really believe this? Show how this whole passage is an example of irony. What rituals or milestones are valid ways of marking the attainment of manhood in our society?

■ When Rachel tries out for the team, she demonstrates great skills, but the Clams are not convinced. How does she torpedo her chances with them? Do you think she was right to be strong about what she wanted, or should she have lain low until she had paid her dues with the team? Deshutsis says, "*Don't ever try to make a girl one of the guys,*" [p. 42], but much later, after a lot has happened, Beaterson asks, "*Are we men enough to let Summerfield become one of us?*" [p. 184] What realizations have led to the second statement?

■ Flint thinks, "*She would change the chemistry between us three Clams. I don't know whether that would be bad or good, but it would be different.*" [p. 124] In the end, we see Rachel as one of the Clams. How has she changed the chemistry? Or has she?

■ Does it show womanly tendencies for a boy to bake cookies? Does it show manly tendencies for a girl not to shave her legs?

## About *Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star*

It's been three years since the great rock star Debbie Grennan threw her life away, and now her son Grady, 15, has to sort out his anger and love for her at a memorial concert in front of seven thousand people. And since his grandmother is moving away, he has to find a new place to live. Is being near his half brother, Louie, worth his living under the domination of rigid, born-again Vickie, who is deeply religious and rules her household with an iron fist?

## Discussion Questions for *Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star*

■ When you see a learning-disabled person like Louie, how do you react? Grady and Vickie have very different ideas about how Louie should be treated, although they both care about his welfare. Contrast their methods and describe them in action. Which style do you think is better for Louie? In what ways does he need both?

■ Grady is facing a big decision about where he is going to live in the coming year. He has four alternatives. What are the advantages and the drawbacks of each? Which would you choose if you were Grady? When you are faced with a confusing choice about your future, what do you do to help yourself decide?

■ A novel always centers on a conflict, which is eventually resolved near the end of the story. In this book, the conflict is between

Grady's positive and negative memories and feelings about his mother and his indecision about what he is going to say about her at the concert. Find some quotes that illustrate his confusion. At what point is this conflict resolved? What does Mitch say or do to contribute to that resolution? Mindy? Dave Davis? Dr. Prescott? Vickie? Louie?

■ Grady wonders, "*Why is it so important to me, both to have something of her in me and to be as unlike her as possible?*" [p. 187] What are the ways he wants to be like and unlike his mother? Why did Debbie wait in line at the ferry to go to Lopez Island on the last night of her life? How do both Mitch and Grady express the same longing?

■ Mitch says about living with a family, "*You have to put up with them and they have to put up with you, and sometimes it's a pain in the butt.*" [p. 208] In other words, compromise is necessary. What compromises do Vickie and Grady offer each other at the end of the story? What else is necessary for mutual respect, and what does Vickie say to make this possible?

## About *The Whistling Toilets*

Stan, 16, and Ginny, 15, have grown up together as best friends and tennis partners. Stan dropped out of competition long ago, but he teaches tennis to neighborhood kids at a community center. Ginny has gone on to the traveling life of a budding tennis star, but this season her game is in a slump and her handlers have appointed Stan to be her interim coach for a few weeks, hoping he can use their closeness to find out what is really troubling her. But Stan is having some new feelings about his childhood friend that are getting in the way.

## Discussion Questions for *The Whistling Toilets*

■ What details tell us that Stan is newly attracted to Ginny, although he won't admit it to himself? This literary technique of showing the truth behind what the speaker is saying is called "the unreliable narrator." Are there other subjects on which Stan's words are unreliable? Why is it so hard for Stan to acknowledge that he is attracted to Ginny?

■ What does Stan get out of the unprofitable job of coaching "the runts"? What qualities in his character make him better as a coach than as a competitor? How is Ginny different?

■ Why has Ginny's tennis game been in a slump? Is the sexual episode with Rick Donsprokken entirely to blame? What does Ginny tell Stan that makes us suspect that other factors might also be responsible? How does Stan help her recover?

■ Why does Stan resist asking Ginny to stay, even though he desperately wants her to? Do you think she would give in if he pressured her? What would be the likely result in the long run?

■ At the ballet, Stan gives away his extra tickets to someone he thinks is deserving, but the man scalps the tickets for \$525. Is Stan's kindness devalued by this? When Stan returns Lord Boxtton's expensive racket, Boxtton treats him with cold disdain. Is it realistic to expect that doing the right thing will always be rewarded with gratitude? What does Stan gain from his virtuous action, in spite of Boxtton's ill-treatment? How has Ginny contributed to Stan's growth in ethical behavior?

## About the Author

A native of Seattle, Randy Powell loves rain. He lives in that city in a quiet neighborhood called Queen Anne Hill, in an old house that was built in 1910, with his wife, Judy, and his two sons, Eli and Drew. Every morning he gets up at 3:30 and writes until it's time to leave for his full-time job as a technical writer and editor for the Boeing Company.



photo © Judy Powell

When he was growing up, sports were his passion. He played all sports, and still plays tennis. His father, a strong, steady presence in his life, coached him. Randy peaked at 11, when his Little League team won the city championship.

In high school he wrote short stories, and in college, at the University of Washington, he wrote novels. He even wrote a Harlequin-type romance but was told it needed more “passion and sparks.” Randy told *VOYA* magazine, “That summer I got a job as a deckhand on a fishing boat in Alaska. By day I was hip-deep in dead salmon, working alongside big burly Norwegian fishermen, and at night I’d tiptoe off to my bunk to work on my romance novel.”

After college he taught — including a stint at an alternative school for dropouts — and loved it. It was when he was in college getting his teaching certificate that he discovered young adult novels, including Robert Cormier’s book *The Chocolate War*. “It blew me away,” he remembered. “I thought, ‘If this is the young adult genre, I’ve found my home.’” And so he has, as his many enthusiastic fans will testify.

### ***For more on Randy Powell:***

#### ***Magazine articles:***

Joel Shoemaker. “Is Writing Sports Action Like Writing a Sex Scene? An Interview with Randy Powell.” *VOYA* magazine. June 2000.

Don Gallo. “An Interview with Randy Powell.” *The ALAN Review*. Fall 2001.

#### ***Web sites:***

[www.fsgkidsbooks.com](http://www.fsgkidsbooks.com)

Contains more information about Randy and his books

[www.randypowell.com](http://www.randypowell.com)

Randy’s own home page, with lots of information about his life and books, photos of his family, E-mail links, and incredibly bad drawings by Randy himself

[www.authors4teens.com](http://www.authors4teens.com)

Features a long and interesting interview with Randy

***Dean Duffy***

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-41698-2 · \$5.95

**An ALA Best Book for Young Adults  
An ALA Quick Pick for Young Adults**

***Is Kissing a Girl Who Smokes Like Licking an Ashtray?***

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-43628-2 · \$5.95

**An ALA Best Book for Young Adults  
Winner of the PEN Center USA West Literacy Award for Children's Literature**

***Run If You Dare***

ISBN 0-374-39981-6 · \$16.00

***Three Clams and an Oyster***

ISBN 0-374-37526-7 · \$16.00

**An ALA Best Book for Young Adults**

***Tribute to Another Dead Rock Star***

ISBN 0-374-37748-0 · \$17.00

Sunburst Paperback: 0-374-47968-2 · \$5.95

**An ALA Best Book for Young Adults**

***The Whistling Toilets***

Aerial Paperback: 0-374-48369-8 · \$5.95

**FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX**

19 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003

Visit [www.fsgkidsbooks.com](http://www.fsgkidsbooks.com)

This reading group guide was prepared by Patty Campbell, a critic, librarian, writer, editor, and teacher in the field of young adult literature, and winner of the Grolier Award from the American Library Association and the ALAN Award from the National Council of Teachers of English.

---