



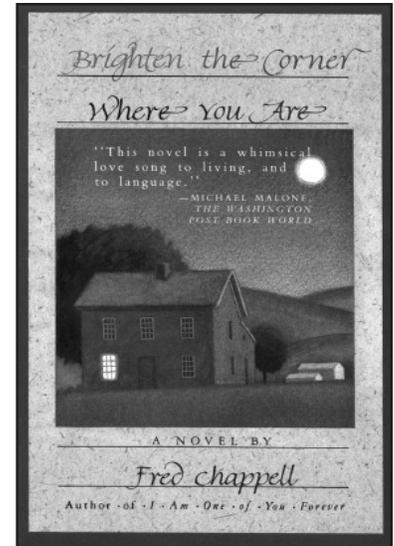
ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

TEACHER'S GUIDE

Brighten the Corner Where You Are

A Novel

by Fred Chappell



224 pages • 978-0-312-05057-3

“This novel is a whimsical love song to living, and to language.”

—*The Washington Post Book World*



FROM THE
AUTHOR OF
*I AM ONE OF YOU
FOREVER*

TO THE TEACHER

This acclaimed novel draws on the beauty, candor, wisdom, imagination, and history of the American South to offer a day in the life of Joe Robert Kirkman, a North Carolina mountain-region schoolteacher, sly prankster, country philosopher, and family man. Kirkman's story is here revealed by Jess, his young son and our beloved narrator, who also, albeit to a lesser degree, presents a story of his own. Amid the many lessons, loves, and losses experienced by these two individuals, students everywhere will find a “deeply felt, warm, funny, [and] wonderful tale, one full of wild humor and humanity” (*The Los Angeles Times*).

Brighten the Corner Where You Are is the second installment in a four-novel series. The “Kirkman quartet” begins with *I Am One of You Forever*; volumes three and four, respectively, are *Farewell, I'm Bound to Leave You* and *Look Back All the Green Valley*.

PRAISE FOR BRIGHTEN THE CORNER WHERE YOU ARE

“[This] resonantly lyrical novel enchants us . . . We are lifted to a height of exhilaration few current writers can take us to.”—*New York Newsday*

“At once lyrical and plainspoken, relentlessly funny and, at crucial moments, breathlessly sad . . . *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* is Fred Chappell's finest work so far and thus—I have been reading and writing and waiting forty years to say this—it's a blooming masterpiece.”—George Garrett

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 of the existence of a fabulous beast. When their dogs start making a fearful noise, he must investigate. While climbing a tree, he confronts 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.

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.

1. Author Fred Chappell begins this story with an initiation. Into what realms is the boy, Jess, being initiated by his father?
2. At what point in the novel did you, as a reader, begin to get a specific sense of place—the mountains, Southern Appalachia, Haywood County, and so on?
3. Encountering the novel's hero-philosopher-clown in the first chapter, you might have wondered if he'd keep on clowning forever. Or perhaps there were non-comic attitudes that you wanted him to demonstrate at the outset. If so, what were they?
4. "My father had declared eternal war on custom," the narrator says. What other such principles might be said to guide Joe Robert's life?
5. What do you make of the fact that Jess, our young narrator, knows his father's private thoughts and out-of-earshot words?
6. What kind of role model is Joe Robert for his son? Do you think Jess is going to be "handicapped" in any way because of his upbringing?
7. In what ways does this novel demonstrate the crucial role of storytelling in our lives? Recall, for example, the scene where Virg Campbell and Joe Robert are trying to revive a drowning girl. Why does Virg start telling a silly story about a rabbit-hunting tourist?
8. Review the account of Lewis Dorson, the quiet mountain boy who came home a decorated soldier and ended up killing himself in Detroit. What are the themes of this account that elicit Joe Robert's piety?
9. What are the virtues of a traditional, rural mountain family, as per page 62?
10. Pruitt Dorson suspects that it was his son's "book learning" and not only the war that injured him. (Pruitt himself only reads the Bible.) Do you agree with the assertion that education "was not the cure but the disease," as Kirkman concedes?
11. What does *Brighten the Corner* have to say about the teaching profession—that is, about: teacher morale (p. 51); the need for hands-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)?
12. Compare and contrast the characters of Joe Robert and Jubal Henry, especially their intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physical selves.
13. How does trying to be a *wise* person fare among other goals in modern American society? Are there really such people as "wise ones"? And if so, is Joe Robert one? Is it proper for a wise man to be foolish, and even dense, at times? (See page 128.)

14. Why do you think the Bacchus narrative takes such an odd turn at the end—that is, when the goat talks and makes an amorous remark to Joe Robert?
15. As the Socrates chapter asks: “Is it of supreme importance” that the students of Tipton “should be conversant with contemporary scientific thought?” (p. 161) Explain your view. 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 mistakenly render Socrates’ opinion about Joe Robert’s teaching methods? Do Joe Robert and Scotty make missteps in their discussion—and if so, where and why?
16. Why did Joe Robert so drastically misjudge the reactions of the school board?
17. How did you, as a reader, react to all the changes Joe Robert goes through at the end of the novel? 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. How do you feel about all this?
18. What is the “joke” that Joe Robert thinks he tells his wife at novel’s end?
19. The last line in *Brighten the Corner* refers to Jess’s mother, who, lying next to her husband in bed, dreams her own dreams while “pursuing her own exotic life.” (p. 212) Why do you think Chappell ends his book this way? Are there any alternate endings that you can think of? What are they?
20. 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.)? How and why would it be appropriate to see Joe Robert as the trickster figure of *Brighten the Corner*? (Some tricksters are often mean-spirited. Is Joe Robert ever?)

**FOR CLASSROOM
DISCUSSION**

1. What does Joe Robert mean by referring to 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 this word? Why does he do so?
2. Discuss the meanings of, and reasons for, the various “tall tales” running through this book.
3. Compare Fred Chappell’s in-some-ways dark view of humanity to Mark Twain’s.
4. Comment on the physical comedy of the devil-possum incident. Where else do we find physical comedy in this novel?
5. Chappell mixes mythological, literary, slang, and popular language. As a class, read a few different pages at random, then discuss the different sources of this author’s vocabulary.

6. Re-read Joe Robert's "philosophy" on page 35, then write an essay exploring how this philosophy compares and contrasts with your own.
7. Why does Joe Robert Kirkman make a hero of William Buckland, the world's first geologist and dinosaur-namer? Explain what makes Buckland a hero in Kirkman's view.
8. How would you describe the custodian's memorial collage (which Joe Robert discovers in the basement of the school)? Is it a work of art? A documentary? An act of historical recording? A diary? A photo album? All of these? Or none of these? Talk about your ideas and answers as a class.
9. In fiction, characters can enter magical worlds in many ways: psychologically, fantastically, through extreme adventures, allegorically, and so on. That said, what exactly is happening in the boiler room when Joe Robert turns the lantern out on Jubal Henry and then finds himself alone in an Arctic region? (See p. 130.)
10. Near the end of the novel, 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, of course. (p. 190) As a class, discuss where and when we as human beings draw the line between telling things exactly as they are and making changes to improve the story. Also, what did reading *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* teach you about the difference between storytelling as a means of telling a lie and storytelling as a means of revealing the truth.
11. As an individual short-essay exercise, discuss why you think the author makes Janie Forbes one of the book's most prominent characters.
12. The pages of *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* are full of metaphors. Identify several of these, and then explain what they mean as well as how they function within both their original context and the narrative as a whole.
13. Comment on this novel's crucial relationship with history. How does it suggest that history ought to be taught and/or learned? What should history ultimately *mean* to those who teach or study it? And what about the novel's take on science?
14. Discuss the narrative structure of this novel, the shape and logic of its overall plot. Is the novel simply episodic, or does it somehow circle around, diverge, echo itself, or interweave. Explain your view with references from the text.
15. Why do you think Chappell chose the title *Brighten the Corner Where You Are*? What does it mean? What does it stand for? Where does this phrase originally come from? And, finally, what does the phrase have in common with the other three titles in Chappell's so-called "Kirkman quartet"? (Feel free to conduct some independent research in order to address these queries.)

OTHER BOOKS BY
THIS AUTHOR

The early, symbolic Southern Gothic novels:

It is Time, Lord (1963; 1996)

The Inkling (1965; 1998)

Dagon (1968; 2002)

Short story collections:

Moments of Light (1980)

More Shapes than One (1991)

The Asheville novel:

The Gaudy Place (1973; 1994)

Collections of poems:

The World Between the Eyes (1971)

Awakening to Music (1979)

Source (1986)

First and Last Words (1989)

C: Poems (1993)

Spring Garden (1995)

A New Pléiade: Selected Poems (1998)

Family Gathering (2000)

The autobiographical “Kirkman quartet” of novels:

I Am One of You Forever (1985)

Brighten the Corner Where You Are (1989)

Farewell, I’m Bound to Leave You (1996)

Look Back All the Green Valley (1999)

Literary criticism:

Plow Naked: Selected Writings on Poetry (1993)

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

Omnibus:

The Fred Chappell Reader (1987)

Anthology (serving as editor):

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

AWARDS FOR THIS AUTHOR
(OTHER THAN THOSE GIVEN
FOR SPECIFIC BOOKS)

Rockefeller Foundation Grant, 1966; National Institute and American Academy Awards in Literature, 1968; Yale University’s Bollingen Prize for Poetry, 1985; The O. Max Gardner Award (which is the highest teaching award bestowed by the University of North Carolina), 1987; The Aiken Taylor Award in Modern American Poetry (presented by the *Sewanee Review*), 1996; and the appointment as North Carolina’s Poet Laureate, 1997.

Fred Chappell was born in 1936 in Canton, North Carolina, and received his B.A. and M.A. from Duke University. He is now Creative Writing Professor at UNC-Greensboro and has long been seen as a major figure in North Carolina literature.

The following notes on Fred Chappell and *Brighten the Corner Where You Are* are extracted from an article, written by Rob Neufeld, which first appeared in the *Asheville Citizen-Times* of May 18, 2003:

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 remember 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 [one]."

"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 You 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 [a bit later] also has him doubting his scientific smugness.

Imagination

One piece 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 [and other beginning writers] will want to put down the facts," he says. "But 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.

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