

A Reading Group Guide to *Brave Face*

By Shaun David Hutchinson

About the Book

Author Shaun David Hutchinson is known for writing fiction about teens facing difficult situations. In *Brave Face*, he writes a different kind of story. He tells of his coming of age, his coming out, and his coming to terms with his depression. He shares his story of survival to help those who may be struggling with the same feelings, showing that there is hope for a better future if you can just find your way through the pain.

Discussion Questions

1. Shaun dedicates the book to “anyone who’s ever felt a little queer.” What are different meanings for the word *queer*? What meaning does Shaun attach to the word? Why do you think he dedicates the book in this way?
2. Why do you think Shaun includes two content warnings in the book? What does he warn his readers about? How does this set the tone for the book?
3. Shaun writes in his journal, “Being gay involves choices and fears. The choice is how to go about finding love. The fear is that I never will.” Picture yourself there with Shaun, having a conversation around this statement. How would you respond to this idea of choices and fears? Is it similar to or different from the way you feel about love? Do these particular choices and fears lead to any others for Shaun or for you?
4. Why does Shaun lie to Alex about being a virgin? How does it affect their relationship? Does this lie foreshadow any patterns in Shaun’s future relationships? What does Shaun lose by having told this lie? Have you ever lied to someone you care about or been lied to? How did it make you feel? What did you learn from the experience?
5. How do Alan’s views about women affect his friendship with Shaun? What information does Shaun keep from Alan because of these views? How does Alan react to Shaun’s coming out? How do you think this affects Shaun?
6. Describe representations of homosexuality that Shaun has seen both in his experiences and in the movies. How does this affect his feelings about his own homosexuality? Do these representations change throughout the course of the book? How might a different interpretation of gay life have changed Shaun’s experience? How can you help to make a safe and welcoming community for all in your school or neighborhood?
7. Describe the future Shaun envisions for a gay man. How does his perceived lack of options affect the choices he makes? When do his ideas about the future begin to change, and what does this new future look like?
8. Why does Shaun confess to stealing the *Playgirl* magazine from Waldenbooks? Do you think

Oscar, the investigator, handles the situation well? If not, how could he have handled it differently? Do you see any similarities between this situation and Shaun's coming-out moments?

9. Discuss the cave and its use as an allegory. Why do you think Shaun brings this up? Do you think it's a fair assessment of his situation? Could you apply the allegory to any other situations in Shaun's life? Does it remind you of any situations in your own life?

10. Throughout the book, Shaun talks about his determination to solve his problems on his own and the fact that he doesn't need help from anyone. How do you feel about this mentality? Is Shaun able to solve his problems on his own? Does he ever learn to ask for help? Why do you think there can be a stigma around asking for and accepting help? Do you think it's more of an internal or external dilemma?

11. Why does Shaun write *The Round Table*? How does it help him come to terms with who he is? What is it about writing that appeals to Shaun? How does it help him throughout his life? Do you have an activity or outlet that's a source of comfort to you? Why might it be important to find something or someone that you can connect with?

12. What is the theme of Shaun's baccalaureate speech? Do you think he effectively conveys his message? Do you think it's fair of him to hold his classmates responsible for his pain? What could Shaun or his classmates have done throughout the school year to project their feelings or become more aware or sensitive to one another's needs?

13. In his journal entry from September 25, 1996, Shaun talks about suicide but eventually says, "How could anyone choose nonexistence when there's always a chance, however small, that something good might happen. I guess it's good that I still hold on to some bit of hope, but there have been brief seconds when it wouldn't have taken much to convince me otherwise." Name some of the good things that do happen to Shaun. How important is this bit of hope to him? What happens to take away this hope? Why do you think it can be difficult to maintain hope, especially after a setback? Where do you look to find hope and inspiration when you're down?

14. Does Shaun's "queer" shirt have the intended effect? Why does he decide to wear it? What are the unintended consequences? Do you think Aimee is right when she says it's "better to whisper than to scream"? Explain your answer.

15. In what ways is the coming-out process more about the person you're coming out to and less about the person coming out? Were all of Shaun's coming out experiences like this? What other situation does he find himself in where the experience is as much about the other people in his life as it is about him? How does Shaun feel about this?

16. How do acting and role-playing fit into Shaun's life? What do these activities tell us about him?

17. Shaun tells Carlos that he's gay, that he doesn't like the derogatory "f" term for gay men, and that he attempted suicide. Why is Shaun able to tell Carlos things that he isn't able to tell others? How does verbalizing these things make Shaun feel? Why can being a good listener be

as important as being willing to discuss your own feelings? What kind of person makes for a good confidant?

18. How do Shaun's feelings about himself affect his relationships? Why does he break up with Dante? How does Brother Jim's sermon affect him?

19. Why is self-harm such an important part of Shaun's story? What does cutting and burning himself do for his mental state? What takes away his last bit of hope and causes him to attempt suicide? Why does this seem like the best option for him in that moment? How do his feelings change after the fact? What makes him decide to ask for help?

20. Describe Shaun's support network. How do they support him? What are his excuses for pushing them away? Why is it sometimes difficult for Maddie to be Shaun's friend?

21. How does the realization that he is both gay and depressed change Shaun's life? Does your perception of his story change upon viewing the depression as its own entity rather than a side effect of being gay?

22. What did Shaun mean when he said, "Being queer wasn't the nucleus of who I was, it was simply a modifier"? Why was this an important lesson for him to learn? What other modifiers can he use to describe himself? What modifiers would you use to describe yourself?

Extension Activities

1. Growing up, Shaun sees a lack of positive portrayals of gay men in movies and television shows. How is queer life currently depicted in the media? Compare and contrast the number and quality of gay characters featured now versus in the late nineties. Discuss whether you think the representation has improved, and ways it could continue to improve.

2. Shaun finds great release in acting and debating because the roles allow him to try on different personas. Try taking an evocative personal memory and rewriting it from the point of view of someone else who was there, or use a scene from a favorite book or movie and rewrite it from a different character's point of view. What changes? What stays the same? How do you feel writing as someone else?

3. Read the section with the cave and its use as an allegory, focusing on the idea of "seeing only the shadows." Think about how this relates to your life, or craft a different allegorical image that's more relevant to your experiences. Then write a brief essay about a related moment, including how you acted, how it made you feel, and how you feel now that you've gained some distance and perspective.

4. Have you or anyone you know ever suffered from depression? What can you do to help those who are depressed or contemplating suicide? Is there a suicide hotline in your community or a support group at your school that you can give some time to? Research resources in your community and also on the national level, such as the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/>. Think about Shaun's behaviors or conversations that might have indicated to others that he was struggling. How might you go about approaching someone

who may not be willing to ask for help? When might you alert an adult to your concerns?

5. When Shaun cannot find depictions of the life he wants to lead, he writes his own. Write a short story or a one-act play that represents who you are and the life you want to lead. Read the story out loud to your classmates, or recruit them to perform your play.

6. A number of musicians and songs play important roles in Shaun's life, helping him to define himself as a gay man and work through his depression. Create a playlist of songs that have meaning to you, songs that help define you or speak to your emotional self. Share these songs with others and explain their meaning in your life.

Guide written by Cory Grimminck, Director of the Portland District Library in Michigan.

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