The Good Times Are Killing Me by Lynda Barry

Discussion Questions

1. The first thing Edna tells us about is the setting of the story, her neighborhood, which she remembers being "White, White, Japanese, White, White ... Then it seemed like everybody just kept moving out until now our street is Chinese, Negro, Negro, White, Japanese, Filipino. She is not only setting the stage for events to come, but telling us about "white flight." Why does her family stay when all other white families have left?

2. Edna Arkins is an especially believable character because of the way Barry uses her voice to tell us about her in terms a child would use. What did Edna say about her feelings that seemed real and convincing to you?

3. On the other hand, by using Edna's voice, the author chose not to use the kind of omniscient narrator who would be able to tell us more about Bonna and the other characters. Did you wonder about Bonna's feelings or what happened to Ranette, or perhaps Edna's mother or Uncle Raymond?

4. The novel is about as short as they come. In fact, there is an argument for calling it a very long "short story," rather than a novel. Then there are the tiny chapters. Do you think the innovative structure was effective? Why, or why not?

5. In the first edition of the book, there were prints of the 18 portraits of American musicians, but most of us have the paperback edition. Still, there is a drawing at the beginning of every chapter, even in the paperback. Did that artwork add to the story, in your opinion? If so, in what way?

6. "One of the reasons I think a lot about childhood and adolescence, Barry told the New York Times, "is because I remember how scary it is, how important the decisions you make are and how kids from poor backgrounds are really left on their own to figure things out." Do you remember how scary it is, and if so, did you relate that to the book? Were you left on your own to figure things out, and if so, how did that affect your life?

7. "I think it's too late," says Barry flatly. "In terms of this country ever being able to mend the rift, I think that's impossible. And that's sort of the message of my play," she said when interviewed by Newsweek about the play she based on this novel. Why? "Any perceivable difference is an opportunity for hierarchy, and human beings grab at the opportunity." What do you think?

8. According to Barry, the story is not really autobiographical. I believe the racial issue is everywhere," she says. "So I thought: Why don't I just set it on my street? It should be there on my street." Do you agree that the issue is everywhere? If so, how does it affect your neighborhood?

9. Aunt Margaret and Uncle Jim disowned Ellen and her "mixed" baby of 40 years ago, but Edna's mother took them in. Suppose it was now. Suppose Ellen was your cousin. How would your family react?