

## Reading Group Guide

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How is Jonathan's "assignment" more of an opportunity than a punishment?
2. Can you imagine a time when pursuing reading and writing might feel subversive, a kind of rebellion, a kind of freedom? Is it possible that recent technologies might lure more readers to engage with literature?
3. Is Jonathan too tough on his father? Most of us remember things our parents said or did which we thought at the time—perhaps correctly—were unjust. Have you ever changed your mind about how you reacted then? Can you imagine responding differently?
4. How would you react if you were to find yourself in Jonathan's situation?
5. What advice would you give to Rene and Jonathan?
6. What choice did Jonathan's father have? How else might he have behaved?
7. What do you make of Jonathan's "crime"? Have you ever done something out of peer pressure, in reaction to social forces, or a particular climate of opinion? Can you imagine how you might stop yourself from doing so again? Are we ever completely free of external influences? How do we overcome social conditioning which doesn't correspond to our values?
8. What do you make of Jonathan's biographical sketches of once-famous, now forgotten writers?
9. Make your own list of books or writers everyone should know, for different reasons.
10. Do you ever find yourself more interested a writer's biography than in his or her work? Have you ever learned something about a writer which made you reevaluate a book you loved? What changed your mind? Should a writer's biography affect how we read their work?
11. Late in the novel, Jonathan declares "The things they don't teach you in school would fill a book." So many of the writer's Jonathan selects were autodidacts. Does school prepare us for life beyond its walls? What would you propose as an ideal curriculum?
12. Jonathan wonders how he might show his solidarity with some of his more besieged friends. Should he feel guilty for being born into a world of privilege? Why? Or, why not?
13. What special significance or associations does the name "Smedley" have for Jonathan?