

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Fredrik Backman is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *A Man Called Ove*, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry*, *Britt-Marie Was Here*, *Beartown*, *Us Against You*, and *Anxious People*, as well as two novellas and one work of nonfiction. His books are published in more than forty countries. He lives in Stockholm, Sweden, with his wife and two children.

- Author's website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Backman describes the struggle between Beartown and Hed as one between the Bear and the Bull. What does this metaphor represent besides two fearsome animals fighting each other? What do these symbols say about the character of each town?
2. Early in the book, Maya and Ana retreat to a special place far from the rest of Beartown. Read Maya's song, "The Island" on pp. 59–60. What do you think this little piece of land means to both of them?
3. Kira makes sacrifices so that Peter can be manager of Beartown hockey. Does Peter make sacrifices for his family, too? Discuss the way their relationship changes over the course of the book.
4. Peter tells Ann-Katrin: "I'm afraid the club might demand more from your sons than it can give back to them." (page 155). Bobo, Benji, and Amat must take their place in the world of men when they join the A-team. How does this change force them to grow up? In what ways does it expose their immaturities? What are the different ways each boy tries to fit in with and be accepted by the older players? In the end, are Peter's fears of what the club will demand of the players justified?

5. People from Hed burn a Beartown Jersey in their town square. This event doesn't hurt anyone physically, but would you still consider it an act of violence? How does this small symbolic act become amplified and have the power to do so much relational damage?
6. What special challenges do Maya and Ana face as they near adulthood? Do you think two such different girls will be able to maintain their friendship as they head down separate paths?
7. "When we describe how the violence between these two towns started, most of us will no longer remember what came first" (page 46). What do you think the tipping point was? What do you think the novel says about human beings' innate tendency toward violence?
8. A theme in *Us Against You* is tribalism versus community. Both dynamics are grounded in a sense of loyalty formed around a shared identity, but what makes them different? How can a strong community become insular and intolerant?
9. Two outsiders come to town, Elisabeth Zackell and Richard Theo. How does each person understand the culture in Beartown, and how do they use that understanding to their individual advantage?
10. "People's reactions to leadership are always the same: if your decisions benefit me, you're fair, and if the same decision harms me, you're a tyrant." (page 197). Are there any characters in Beartown who act against their own self-interest? What do you think are their reasons for doing so?
11. When Ana breaks Benji's trust and reveals his secret, do you understand her action? Is what she does to Benji made more forgivable because of the circumstances?
12. Retaliation is a constant theme throughout the book. Are there any characters who try to break this cycle of violence? What do you think it takes for this pattern to be broken?
13. Richard Theo says to Peter: "They rule with the help of violence. A democracy can't allow that. Anyone who becomes powerful because they've physically fought their way to the top needs to be opposed." (page 271) Do you agree with Theo? Does Theo rule with the help of violence?
14. Sports has the power to divide and the power to unite. On balance, do you think Beartown would be better off with or without its hockey club?
15. "We will say 'things like this are no one's fault,' but of course they are. Deep down we will know the truth. It's plenty of people's fault. Ours." (page 293) Do you agree with this statement, or are their forces outside of the Beartown citizens' control that are, in part, responsible for the violence?

- <https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Us-Against-You/Fredrik-Backman/9781501160806>

BOOK REVIEWS

Publisher's Weekly

Backman (*A Man Called Ove*) returns to the hockey-obsessed village of his previous novel *Beartown* to chronicle the passion, violence, resilience, and humanity of the people who live there in this engrossing tale of small-town Swedish life. As a new hockey season approaches, the *Beartown* team is in a precarious situation. The village was rocked after a junior team member was convicted of rape the previous spring, and the hockey club is in danger of being liquidated. General manager Peter Andersson is under intense scrutiny—particularly from one aggressive group of fans who call themselves “The Pack”—and enters into a questionable agreement with slippery local politician Richard Theo in order to save the team. When an unconventional new coach arrives, *Beartown*’s hopes fall on the shoulders of four untested (and possibly unreliable) teenagers. As tension between *Beartown* and its rival town, Hed, comes to a boiling point over hockey, jobs, and political squabbles, each member of the community confronts the same questions: “what would you do for your family? What wouldn’t you do?” Narrated by a collective “we,” Backman’s excellent novel has an atmosphere of both Scandinavian folktale and Greek tragedy. Darkness and grit exist alongside tenderness and levity, creating a blunt realism that brings the setting’s small-town atmosphere to vivid life. (June) --Staff (Reviewed 05/07/2018) (Publishers Weekly, vol 265, issue 19, p).

Library Journal

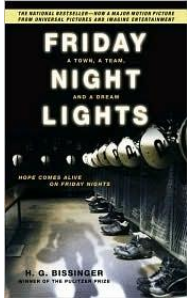
/ Starred Review */* This follow-up to *Beartown* is about hockey—and everything else. Here the residents of Backman's isolated Swedish town, with some new additions, resume their lives where they left off at the end of the earlier novel. Since the history of each individual is examined and outlined in turn, new readers can catch up quickly. Some minor incidents in the first book play out in this one, exploding the little mines buried in *Beartown*. With a penchant for foreshadowing and then foiling readers' expectations, Backman widens the vision of the setting, encompassing the rival town of Hed and its own hockey team, made up of former players from *Beartown*'s soon-to-be disbanded league. It's just a game, two teams, sticks and pucks. Us against you, doesn't that say it all? VERDICT There is even more potential for book group discussion here as Backman explores violence, political maneuvering, communities, feminism, sexuality, criminality, the role of sports in society, and what makes us all tick. [See Prepub Alert, 12/11/17.] --Mary K. Bird-Guilliams (Reviewed 04/15/2018) (Library Journal, vol 143, issue 7, p58).

Kirkus Reviews

Shockwaves from the incidents in *Beartown* (2017) shake an economically depressed hockey town in this latest from the author of *A Man Called Ove*. Swedish novelist Backman loves an aphorism and is very good at them; evident in all his novels is an apparent ability to state a truth about humanity with breathtaking elegance. Often, he uses this same elegance to slyly misdirect his readers. Sometimes he overreaches and words that sound pretty together don't hold up to scrutiny. This novel has a plethora of all three. Grim in tone, it features an overstocked cast of characters, all of whom are struggling for self-definition. Each has previously been shaped by the local hockey club, but that club is now being defunded and resources reallocated to the club of a rival town. Some *Beartown* athletes follow, some don't. Lines are drawn in the sand. Several characters get played by a Machiavellian local politician who gets the club reinstated. Nearly all make poor decisions, rolling the town closer and closer to tragedy. Backman wants readers to know that things are complicated. Sure, many of *Beartown*'s residents are bigots and bullies. But some are generous and selfless. Actually, the bigots and bullies are also generous and selfless, in certain circumstances. And Lord knows they've all had a rough time of it. The important thing to remember is that hockey is pure. Except when it inspires violence. This is an interesting tactic for a novel in

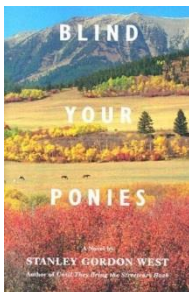
our cultural moment of sensitivity, and it can feel cumbersome. "When guys are scared of the dark they're scared of ghosts and monsters," he writes. "But when girls are scared of the dark they're scared of guys." Margaret Atwood said it better and with more authority decades ago. Backman plays the story for both cynicism and hope, and his skill makes both hard, but not impossible, to resist. (Kirkus Reviews, May 15, 2018).

READALIKES



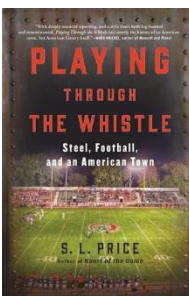
***Friday Night Lights* by H.G. Bissinger**

Chronicles a football season in Odessa, Texas, a depressed All-American town that lives and dies with the fortunes of its high school football team.



***Blind Your Ponies* by Stanley Gordon West**

A winless high school basketball team is on the rebound after two stars move to town and inspire coach Sam Pickett to get down to business.



***Playing Through the Whistle* by S.L. Price**

A Sports Illustrated senior writer presents a moving epic of football in industrial America, tracing the story of Aliquippa, Pennsylvania's now-shuttered steel mill, and its legendary high school football team.