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***“A thoroughly enjoyable read that should be on the shelves of every school library.”***

**–Kevin Jennings, Founder, GLSEN**



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**Discussion Guide**

## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Playing by the Book* is about seventeen-year-old high school newspaper editor Jake Powell, fresh from Alabama, who lands in New York City to attend Columbia University's prestigious summer journalism program. For Jake, it's a dream come true, but his father, a fundamentalist Christian preacher, smells trouble. And his father is rarely wrong.

Jake navigates new and unfamiliar ways "up North," starting with his feelings for a handsome Jewish classmate named Sam. What Jake could keep hidden back home now rises to the surface in the Big Apple.

Standing by his side are a gorgeous brunette with a Park Avenue attitude and the designer bags to match, a high school friend who has watched Jake grow up and isn't sure she's ready to let him go, and an outrageously flamboyant aunt who's determined to help Jake find the courage to accept love and avoid the pain that she has experienced.

Provocative and moving, *Playing by the Book* is a feel-good novel about the joy and heartbreak we encounter in the search for our own truth.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



S. Chris Shirley is an award-winning author, director and former President of the Board of Lambda Literary. He directed Roger Kuhn's music video, "What's Your Name," which aired nationally in the US and made the annual MTV-Logo Top 10. He also wrote and directed "Plus," an award-winning short film that played at film festivals internationally.

He graduated from Auburn University where he served as photo editor of *The Auburn University Plainsman*. He later received a graduate degree from Columbia University and studied filmmaking at New York University. He was born and raised in Greenville, Alabama, and now resides in Manhattan. *Playing by the Book* is Chris' first book. Visit Chris online at [schrisshirley.com](http://schrisshirley.com).

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.” –Plato

1. From the beginning of the book, it’s clear that Jake feels a great deal of pressure to live up to the expectations of his family, especially his father. What are some of the ways these high expectations help Jake excel? What are some of the ways they may cause more harm than good?
2. “As a PK, I was held to what I called the ‘Jesus Standard’ by everyone in town on absolutely everything I did.” Like Jake, many teenagers feel they are being judged by others basically all the time. What are some of the different ways young people react to judgment? How much should a person care what other people think? (Page 3)
3. Early in the book, Jake thinks, “Certainly, I wanted to do the Lord’s will above everything else.” Do you believe Jake wants to do the Lord’s will above everything else? Use examples from the text to support your answer. (Page 10)
4. There are thousands of Christian denominations in the United States. Which ones are most similar to the One-Way Bible churches described by Jake?
5. Shortly after he lands in New York, Jake says: “I was only a thousand miles from Tarsus, but it felt a lot farther—like I was on the other side of the planet.” Describe a time when you have felt this way. (Page 14)
6. Jake finds himself attracted to Sam the first time they meet. But as soon as Sam leaves the room, Jake says, “What I felt was probably just excitement about being in New York and making new friends.” Why do you think Jake explains his feelings in this way? (Page 30)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

7. Early in the book, Jake and Sam have a brief chat about Scotty Joe Weaver, an 18-year-old man brutally murdered in Alabama because he was gay. Alabama's hate crime law does not include sexual orientation, which means Scotty Joe's murderers were not charged with a hate crime. Should they have been? What is the purpose of hate crime laws? Which categories should they include? (Page 45)
8. In seventh grade, Jake has a moment in the school locker room when Kenny Ballard, "who'd been the butt of every gay joke," warns him not to check out other guys in the locker room. Do you think this was good advice? Why do you think Jake reacted with disgust at this advice? (Page 57)
9. Jake thinks often about the Bible verses that One-Way Bible adherents believe prohibit being gay. Why is it so important for him to find a Biblical rebuttal to these verses?
10. At the movies with Sam and Joshua and Julie, Jake is thrilled to be "hanging with the cool kids" for the first time in his life. Why is this moment so important to Jake? (Page 134)
11. In New York, Jake throws his bible in the trash can and then, after some thought, takes it out again, similar to how he throws away and then retrieves a fitness magazine earlier in the book. Both these scenes highlight the conflict between what Jake has been taught his whole life and what Jake feels. What advice would you give a young person struggling with this kind of conflict? How should Jake choose between what he has been taught and what he wants?
12. At his lowest point, Jake is alone at Phoebe's apartment and imagines his life as a gay man. Because he has grown up in a town where there are no gay role models, Jake's thoughts are based on stereotypes of gay people that have been proven untrue in many places. What current events are helping young people like Jake today realize that their futures as gay adults will be promising? (Page 158)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

13. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 24. And LGBT youth are many times more likely than their straight peers to attempt suicide. What accounts for these statistics? And what can you do as an individual to help change them?
14. When considering what will happen if he comes out, Jake is worried that he may be sent to a gay-conversion camp. Even though conversion therapy has been discredited across the board, there are still therapists in 20 states and the District of Columbia who claim they can convert a gay person to straight. Who might conversion therapy appeal to? Do you think the number of therapists offering conversion therapy will be higher or lower in ten years? Explain your answer. (Page 169)
15. Julie tells Jake, “Sure, it might take some people time to adjust to the real you, but they’ll come around if they really love you.” Do you believe this is true? Use examples from your own life in your answer. (Page 171)
16. Jake says that of all the labels that describe him, “gay” feels a lot bigger than the others, “like an entirely new skin.” Why do we put more significance on some labels than others? What labels of yours are most important? Which ones do you consider less so? (Page 172)
17. Aunt Phoebe gives some sound advice to Jake after he tells her he’s gay: “Live the best life you can *for you*.” What makes this such good advice? (Page 173)
18. Aunt Phoebe also tells Jake, “I know you can’t possibly believe this now, but one day, you’ll be grateful that you’re gay. You’ll view it as a gift.” Do you think Phoebe is right? Why or why not? (Page 173)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

19. When Jake calls his father to tell him he skipped the sermon at the One-Way Bible church in Brooklyn, he realizes that “the only way out was to invent another lie.” Why is it easier for Jake to lie than to tell the truth? Is this surprising, since lying is also considered a sin by Jake’s religion? Is it always wrong for a child to lie to a parent? When might lying to an adult be morally acceptable? (Page 202)
20. Jake says, “I’d heard my entire life that this country was founded on Christianity.” Was it? Use what you know about American history to explain your answer. (page 206)
21. When Sam teases Jake for referring to his mother as “Momma,” Jake notes that “back home, most everyone referred to their momma that way—no matter how old they were.” This is a regional difference in language. Pick a few examples and discuss them. How do they add to or detract from the English language? (Page 218)
22. Sam tells Jake that living in the closet is “going to look like the freakin’ Garden of Eden, but it’s really a grave.” What does Sam mean? Is he right? (Page 220)
23. Before he leaves New York, Jake realizes “I had learned a lot at Columbia, but my biggest lessons mostly came from outside the classroom.” Share an example of an important lesson you have learned in school, and an important lesson you have learned outside of school. (Page 224)
24. Jake thinks: “It suddenly seemed silly to compare one person’s thorn to another’s since the thorn that looks the smallest may just be dug in the deepest.” Discuss. (Page 231)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

25. While he's in New York, Jake misses "fried chicken, homemade gravy, Southern hospitality, and the rolling hills of Alabama." What do you like most about your own town? What aspects of where you live would you like to be different? (Page 245)
26. Jake and Sam happen upon a statue of Eleanor Roosevelt in Riverside Park with an inscription from fifty years before that speaks to them perfectly. Find a quote from a person who is no longer alive that inspires you personally. (Page 253)
27. During his coming out conversation with Tracy, Jake says, "I've always felt that I had to keep a fortress around my issues and those of my family." Does this explain adequately why Jake has never shared his feelings about his sexuality with his best friend? What other reasons are at play here? (Page 286)
28. Jake recalls some of the hymnals of his childhood: "Blessed Assurance," "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," "The Lilly of the Valley," "When the Roll Is Called Up Yonder," "It Is Well." Look up the lyrics to one of these songs. How does this music affect the way Jake views the world? Discuss whether music has the power to change a person. (Page 291)
29. Jake finds it difficult to believe that his family's religion will ever recognize gay people as "anything but abominations." Think of some ways mighty institutions—a specific religion, the American government, the Supreme Court—have changed their minds about specific topics over the years. Make a list and consider it. Then discuss whether you agree with Jake. (Page 293)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

30. After a long and difficult journey, Jake has a beautiful moment of self-acceptance on the front steps of his church: "For years, I'd been swimming upstream, fighting against my very nature to be what I thought God wanted me to be, but I had grown to realize that He loves me just the way I am, and I could stop fighting." What do you think of this scene? Of the ending of the book as a whole? (Page 299)
  
31. Reread the epigram of the book, written by Epictetus nearly two thousand years ago: "If you desire to be good, begin by believing that you are wicked." Explain in your own words what this means. How does it apply to Jake's life? How might it apply to your own?



## RECOMMENDED READING

At one of his low points, Jake thinks: “At least Jews, blacks, and other ethnic minorities were born into families that offered support and wisdom passed down from generation to generation. I had no such luck—no legacy of wisdom to guide me through the minefield of discrimination I would surely face the rest of my life.” But Jake does have this legacy, though not from his immediate family. He just doesn’t know it yet. Below is some of Jake’s legacy, which contains wisdom he may find helpful.

**Giovanni’s Room by James Baldwin (1956)**

**The Front Runner by Patricia Nell Warren (1974)**

**The Color Purple by Alice Walker (1982)**

**And the Band Played On by Randi Shilts (1987)**

**The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies by Vito Russo (1987)**

**Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story by Paul Monette (1992)**

**“In the Gloaming,” by Alice Elliott Dark, in Best American Short Stories 1994 (1994)**

**Gods and Monsters by Christopher Bram (1995)**

**Autobiography of Red by Anne Carson (1998)**

**The Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky (1999)**

**“Brokeback Mountain,” in Close Range: Wyoming Stories by Annie Proulx (1999)**

**The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst (2004)**

**Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic by Alison Bechdel (2006)**

**What They Always Tell Us by Martin Wilson (2009)**

**The Vast Fields of Ordinary by Nick Burd (2009)**

**Gemini Bites by Patrick Ryan (2011)**

**Ask the Passengers by A.S. King (2012)**

**Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe by Benjamin Alire Sáenz (2013)**

**Two Boys Kissing by David Levithan (2013)**

## PRAISE FOR *PLAYING BY THE BOOK*

S. Chris Shirley's first novel is beautiful and profound and will move readers to question their own beliefs and their ability to look at people beyond the labels, beyond what we "see." Mr. Shirley's powerful prose draws us into Jake's world

- Ruth Compton, American Library Association

"In *Playing by The Book*, S. Chris Shirley tells a story I loved curling up with, featuring one of the most endearing teen protagonists I've read in years."

--Alex Sanchez, author of *The God Box* and *Boyfriends with Girlfriends*

"Shirley's first (novel) is solid...his plotting moves smoothly, and his characters feel likable and real. An author worth watching."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"In his debut novel, Shirley—president of the Lambda Literary Foundation—offers up a optimistic but not overly romanticized look at youth, becoming oneself, and the discomfort and joy that comes from finding out who you want to be in the world, whether your parents like it or not."

—*The Advocate* (10 Great LGBT Summer Reads)



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