



Discussion Questions

1. What narratives are presented about “the Day the Music Died” throughout the book? What is the relationship between history as lived and history as told?
2. “Celebrity” is an important theme in many of the stories in the book. How are the lives of everyday people impacted by the lives of the famous? What paradoxes and contradictions about stardom are communicated by the stories in the book?
3. *Winter Dance Party* oscillates between stories about systems and stories about people. How do the characters in the book cope with institutional or structural control? What methods of resistance do they employ? Do you think these methods are productive?
4. How do the stories in the collection balance the romanticism of small-town America with its darker undercurrents?
5. Rumors, myths, legends, and folktales all play important roles in the book. How do they impact the lives of the characters? The town of Clear Lake? The state of Iowa?
6. Several characters in the book actively seek out confrontation. Do you relate to their desire? What is it about confrontation that offers them some sense of hope or promise?
7. Tensions between art and commerce surface throughout the book. Are the two concepts opposed? Overlapping? Symbiotic? How do the stories try to untangle the concepts?

8. Many of the stories feature complicated, even conspiratorial plots. What does *Winter Dance Party* have to say about conspiracies and paranoia as forces in American life?

9. What role does politics play in the book? How do the characters interact with politicians and political parties? How well do you think that relationship maps onto our 21st-century reality?

10. Death and decay feature prominently in the collection. Yet, so, too, do humor and community. How does *Winter Dance Party* balance optimism and pessimism, hope and fear?

Recommended Reading



- Mason & Dixon* by Thomas Pynchon
- Pedro Páramo* by Juan Rulfo
- Ducks, Newburyport* by Lucy Ellmann
- Distant Star* by Roberto Bolaño
- “The Cats in the Prison Recreation Hall” by Lydia Davis
- Invisible Cities* by Italo Calvino
- Sixty Stories* by Donald Barthelme
- Plain Air: Sketches from Winesburg, Indiana* by Michael Martone
- Together We Can Bury It* by Kathy Fish

Décor

Dried wheat shafts in country-style vases give a nice Midwestern ambiance.



Plastic crickets make humorous gag décor, especially if placed around a food table.



Ears of dried corn, maize, and colorful Indian corn can be used for decoration to evoke the Midwest.



Several companies make retro tin signs that feature Buddy Holly and the original Winter Dance Party.



Candles

A Craft & Kin candle in Vintage Leather suggests the shine of patent leather shoes, the squeak of diner booths, old car seats, and saddle shoes on a dance floor.



The Rock & Roll Candle Co. makes gorgeous candles inspired by your favorite classic songs.



Ryan Holmes has created a “Day the Music Died” candle that comes in a variety of scents, including Apple Harvest, perfect for a Midwestern setting.



ArtWow carries a Buddy Holly candle handmade by Daniel Cash that comes in a variety of scents and colors.



Bright Black’s handcrafted Tall Grass candle brings to mind the wide-open fields of Clear Lake, Iowa, and the breeze of the Midwest.

Music

Winter Dance Party has a built-in setlist with Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper, so those musicians make an excellent soundtrack. Additionally, SiriusXM's app features the 50s Gold channel, and if you're planning on throwing a sock hop or dance party, SiriusXM's Oldies Party channel features the best party songs of the 50s and 60s. If you have Spotify, set your artist preference to Buddy Holly, and be pleasantly surprised by what pops up. Want some unexpected ambiance? Search YouTube for "cricket sounds," and you'll capture the chirping of a late-night Midwestern field.



Just need a small speaker to set the mood? Crosley makes a Rondo Retro Bluetooth speaker with crisp sound that can play your SiriusXM app directly from your phone through a speaker that looks like a mini old-fashioned radio.



If you've got records to spin, then Victrola's updated 3-speed Bluetooth player is a must for a retro throwback. It comes in various colors with built-in speakers, but the leather-bound portable case in a soft robin's-egg blue is the most evocative of 50s whimsy, with a modern twist.

Sock Hop

Few reading parties go better with this book than to pair it with a good ol' sock hop or dance party. Invite your fellow readers to dress in poodle skirts, sweaters, bow ties, saddle shoes, and flowing hair ribbons. Throw on a 50s dance mix, and you've got yourself a shindig to get you in the mood.



Want a fun party favor? Art+Social carries clear-lens, nonprescription "nerd" glasses in bulk.

SOCK HOP



SOCK HOP

Rock-Around the Clock

Given by

When

Where

RSVP

You're Invited!



Poodle Skirt Pattern

Turn any flowy A-line skirt into a poodle skirt with this pattern. Print and cut out the pattern on iron-on transfer paper and felt, and you've got yourself some 50s class.



Recipes

Rainbow Jell-O Cups

Prep Time:

While these individual serving cups are easy to make, with less than 5 minutes of actual preparation time per colored layer, each layer takes at least an hour to set in the refrigerator in between colors, so plan accordingly. This treat can be made a day in advance, as long as it is covered tightly in the refrigerator.

Ingredients:

- 6 boxes different-flavored Jell-O
- Water
- 1 can (12 oz) evaporated milk (optional: for creamy, opaque layers)
- Clear plastic cups (recipe makes about 10)
- 1 container whipped cream (to preference)

Instructions:

Don't use unflavored gelatin for this recipe. You can layer the colors in any way you choose, but if you want a rainbow, layer it from the bottom up: red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple. Start with your first color, and follow the directions on the Jell-O box, which involves boiling hot water on the stove, adding the gelatin packet, stirring until dissolved, then adding cold water. If you want to make creamy, opaque layers to go between the translucent layers (as in the top image), stir in $\frac{1}{2}$ cold water and $\frac{1}{2}$ evaporated milk instead of just cold water (for the lactose-intolerant, you can substitute non-dairy creamer for the evaporated milk). Pour a small amount of the Jell-O into each clear cup, place the cups on a tray, and refrigerate until the layer is firm, which can take anywhere from 1 hour to 2 hours. Repeat with the next color, adding a new layer to each cup after the previous layer is firm, and refrigerating the newly layered cups until the new layer is firm. Repeat with each layer. Once the layers are complete and firm, top off each cup with whipped cream before serving, and add fresh-cut berries, kiwi, sprinkles, or other toppings of choice.

Variations:

Jell-O comes in many flavors and colors, and different colors can be used to match the theme of your reading party. For holidays, try orange and black cherry for Halloween, cherry and lemon-lime for Christmas, watermelon and strawberry for Valentine's Day, strawberry and blue raspberry for July 4th, or lemon-lime and lemon for St. Patrick's Day.



Color & Flavor Suggestions:

- Red: cherry, raspberry, strawberry, or watermelon
- Orange: orange or peach
- Yellow: lemon
- Green: lemon-lime
- Blue: blueberry or blue raspberry
- Purple: grape or black cherry

Simple Cherry Angel-Food Bars



Ingredients:

- 1 box angel-food cake mix
- 21 oz canned cherry pie filling

Important notes:

Angel-food cake is light and will deflate once it cools. To avoid deflated cake, do not make this recipe too far ahead of your event. For the recipe to work, you must use the just-add-water variety of angel-food cake mix. Do not use the variety with the egg pouches, or the cake will not set. For the cherry pie filling, use the standard filling with juice, not a variety with syrup.

Instructions:

Adjust oven rack to the center position, and preheat oven to 350° F. Use a 9x13 baking pan. Rub butter along the bottom of the pan to keep a piece of parchment paper in place, but do not grease the sides of the pan in any way, as the angel food will use the sides of the pan to rise. Line the bottom of the pan with a piece of parchment paper. Mix the dry cake mix and the entire can of cherry pie filling in a large bowl, and whisk gently by hand until thick, pink, and fluffy. Do not use a mixer; angel food is too light for a mixer. Pour the batter into the pan. Bake for 30 minutes or until a toothpick inserted into the center comes out clean. Allow to cool for 30 minutes before slicing. The cake will start out fluffy and will deflate or depress in the center as it cools, but it will be cooked all the way through and will still taste delicious. Some may prefer to cool the cake upside down to mitigate the deflating. Add a dollop of whipped cream and a maraschino cherry to the top of each bar for an extra-fancy flair.

Variations:

Cherry is about as 50s-feeling as it gets, but you can also try this recipe with peach pie filling, lemon pie filling, crushed pineapple, or other pie filling varieties.

Snow-Capped Raspberry Gelatin

Ingredients:

- 1 envelope unflavored gelatin
- ½ cup cold water
- 1 cup half-and-half cream
- ½ cup sugar
- 1 package (8 oz) cream cheese, softened
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 1 package (3 oz) raspberry gelatin
- 1 cup boiling water
- 1 package (10 oz) frozen sweetened raspberries, thawed
- Fresh raspberries, optional



Instructions:

In a small bowl, sprinkle unflavored gelatin over cold water, and let it stand for 1 minute. In a small saucepan, combine half-and-half and sugar. Cook and stir just until mixture comes to a simmer. Remove from the heat, and stir cream mixture into gelatin until dissolved. In a large bowl, beat the cream cheese until smooth. Fold in gelatin mixture. Stir in vanilla. Pour into a 6-cup mold coated with cooking spray. Refrigerate until set, about an hour. In a small bowl, dissolve raspberry gelatin in boiling water. Stir in frozen raspberries until blended. Allow to cool to room temperature, then carefully spoon the raspberry layer over the cream cheese layer. Cover, and refrigerate for at least 4 hours. When ready to serve, unmold onto a serving plate. Garnish with fresh berries if desired.

Variations:

This can be made with any type of gelatin flavor, frozen fruit, and fresh fruit. Peach, pineapple, and blueberry are good alternatives.

Malted Milkshakes

Ingredients*:

- ½ cup whole milk
- ¼ cup malted milk powder
- 1½ cups vanilla ice cream (or your favorite flavor)
- Clear plastic cups
- 1 container whipped cream (to preference)
- Maraschino cherries (to preference)

**Makes 1 16-oz shake or 2 8-oz shakes.
Double, triple, quadruple ingredients as necessary.*

If making your own whipped cream:

- ½ cup of very cold heavy cream
- 1 teaspoon of granulated sugar

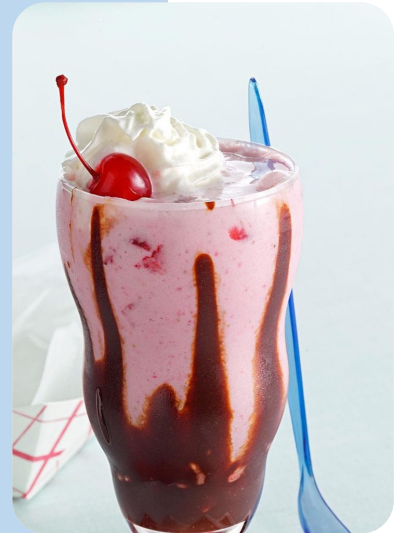
Combine the heavy cream and sugar in a large, deep bowl. Whisk by hand vigorously until soft peaks form, 30 to 60 seconds. Let sit.

Instructions:

If using glass containers, chill them in the freezer before pouring in the ingredients for an extra-cold shake. Blend the milk and malted milk powder (which can usually be found in the dried milk or baking sections of most well-stocked grocery stores) in a blender on high speed until the malted milk powder dissolves, 15 to 20 seconds. Add the ice cream and blend on high until creamy and thick, pushing the mixture down as needed, 20 to 25 seconds. Pour the milkshake into as many glasses as you need. Top with whipped cream and a maraschino cherry. Serve immediately.

Variations:

While vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry are the tried-and-true shake classics, your shake can be any flavor you want. Change the flavor of ice cream as desired, or add fresh fruit and/or 1 tablespoon (per 16 oz shake) of fruit preserves to vanilla ice cream. For a thicker shake, add more ice cream; for a thinner shake, use less ice cream. Mix flavors, such as dark chocolate and black cherry. Drip chocolate, caramel, or butterscotch syrup down the insides of the glass. For a delicious strawberry shake, use ½ cup of frozen, unsweetened sliced strawberries and up to 1 tablespoon of strawberry preserves. Another popular 50s flavor was a grasshopper shake, which can be made with vanilla ice cream, crème de cacao and green crème de menthe, to taste.



Triple Cheese Balls

Ingredients:

- 2 packages (8 oz each) cream cheese, softened
- 1 cup parmesan cheese, grated
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- Assorted crackers

Pine Nut-Pesto Cheese Ball:

- 2 tablespoons prepared pesto
- 2 tablespoons fresh basil, minced
- 10 tablespoons toasted pine nuts, divided

Horseradish-Bacon Cheese Ball:

- 2 tablespoons prepared horseradish
- ½ cup cooked bacon, crumbled
- 1 green onion, finely chopped

Salsa Cheese Ball:

- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- ⅓ teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons fresh cilantro, minced
- 1 tablespoon onion, finely chopped
- 1 tablespoon seeded jalapeño pepper, minced



Instructions:

In a large bowl, beat the cream cheese, parmesan cheese, and garlic until blended. Divide into three portions.

For the Pine Nut-Pesto Cheese Ball:

Beat one portion of cream cheese mixture and pesto until blended. Stir in basil. Chop 2 tablespoons of pine nuts, and stir into the cheese mixture. Shape into a ball. Roll the ball in the remaining pine nuts, so they attach to the outside. Wrap in plastic, and chill until firm.

For the Horseradish-Bacon Cheese Ball:

Beat one portion of cream cheese mixture and horseradish until blended. Stir in bacon and onion. Shape into a ball. Wrap in plastic, and chill until firm.

For the Salsa Cheese Ball:

Beat one portion of cream cheese mixture, tomato paste, and salt until blended. Stir in cilantro, onion, and jalapeño. Shape into a ball. Wrap in plastic, and chill until firm.

Variations:

Can be served with any type of crackers, but for a 50s style, try Sociables, Chicken-in-a-Biscuit, Ritz, rye crackers, and/or club crackers. Saltines were also very popular in the 50s but might be a little bland for your fellow readers these days.

Simple Cherry Fudge

Ingredients:

- 10 oz cherry-flavored baking chips
- 12 oz white icing



Instructions:

This recipe works best if you use a quality rich-and-creamy white icing, such as Betty Crocker's Rich & Creamy, rather than a thin icing. Line an 8x8 pan with parchment paper. Combine the cherry-flavored baking chips and the white icing in a microwave-safe bowl. Microwave for 30 seconds, then stir together. Microwave for another 30 seconds, then stir again. The baking chips and icing should combine into a smooth texture with no lumps. Pour the mixture into the parchment-lined pan, and place it in the refrigerator for a few hours.

Variations:

Cherry is a very-50s flavor, but this fudge can be made with any variety of baking chips. Some popular flavors might be butterscotch, white chocolate, and mint chocolate. For holidays, or to match a theme, you can use metal cookie cutters to cut the fudge into shapes.

Pin the City on Iowa

Print this page. Mount it on a piece of corkboard with pushpins or thumbtacks. Print and cut out the city bubbles on the following page. The first player picks a city. Blindfolded, that player then pins the city onto the state of Iowa with a pin. The player who gets closest to the city locations wins.





Thanks!



Iowa One!



Bookmarks. Print, and cut out along the blue background edges. Cut through the overlapping glasses that run in between the blue edges.