Summer “Reading” Guide

Director, Benh Zeitlin

Fox Searchlight Pictures in Association with Cinereach, 2012

Greeting class of 2022 from Earlham College. We here at the college eagerly anticipate the fall arrival of a diverse and inclusive class of more than 270 first-year students from across the United States and world. Traditionally our custom at Earlham has been to ask that over the summer the incoming class begin college together by giving thoughtful attention to a common reading by an esteemed author who will visit and engage the Earlham community in the fall semester. This summer, however, we invite you to engage an alternate sort of “textual reading” in the form of the critically acclaimed motion picture film *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, starring Quvenzhané Wallis and directed by Benh Zeitlin.

**During the month of July, you will receive the first-year summer common questions for the film.**

About the Film: In 2012 *Beasts of the Southern Wild* won the Caméra d’Or Award at the Cannes Film Festival and the Grand Jury Prize: Dramatic at the Sundance Film Festival. The film received four Academy Awards nominations in the categories of Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Actress (Quvenzhané Wallis, who at age nine became the Academy’s youngest Best Actress Nominee in history). The film is an adventure-fantasy narrated by a six-year-old girl named Hushpuppy (sometimes referred to as Boss Lady by her father). Hushpuppy lives with her father Wink (Dwight Henry) in a remote Delta community “down here” below the levee called “the Bathtub,” as distinguished from the life “up there” in the dry world. Wink is a stern father and taskmaster who (along with several other of the film’s adults) is preparing Hushpuppy (and other communal loved ones) for the end of the world. As Wink begins to mysteriously fall sick, the natural world that surrounds the Bathtub appears to fall ill with him. Thunder clouds threaten, deadly storms come and go and come again, ice caps melt, and fearsome giant prehistoric beasts called aurochs emerge and run wild. As rising water continues to take lives and threaten the existence of the Bathtub, Hushpuppy (with a few friends in tow) embarks on a search though the water for her long-absent mother.

The film explores themes of familial and community belonging; the human imagination, memory, magic, ritual and fantasy; environmental and industrial degradation; the human relationship universal nature; the power of communal and individual grit, hope and love; the ancient past and the contemporary present; interracial/ethnic unity; the elements of life (earth, sky/wind, water and fire); death, fear and overcoming; the importance of food and other customs to human belonging; the in/justice of geography; the importance of art, dance, merriment, singing, strong drink, and the grammar of communal covenant, gender boundaries and unity, and much more…
Beast of the Southern Wild & Earlham College: We are excited to report to you that one of the Co-Producers of Beast of the Southern Wild, Josh Penn, is an Earlham graduate who is scheduled to join us on campus for a convocation on Monday, August 20th, at 1:00 p.m., in the Goddard Auditorium. Indeed, the college invites you to careful engagement with this film ahead of the campus-wide discussion to come with Penn, and with another, during the fall semester.

To help each of you prepare for our time together exploring Beast of the Southern Wild, perhaps it would be helpful to keep the following in mind as you interpret the film as a visual-audio text. As leading consumers of popular culture, your generation can excel at becoming enlightened witnesses to the connections, the similarities (or not), between cinematic representations and the cultural/natural word around us. Really good films invite us to consider our own lives, to think critically, and to transform. As the public intellectual and popular culture critic bell hooks suggests, there is a great power associated with visual representations as a primary pedagogical dimension of American life; and therefore, we must become more enlightened witnesses to this fact in our everyday moral lives. With the aforementioned in mind, watch the film (at least) a time or two. You are then invited to respond to eight (8) of the sixteen (16) guiding tasks and questions below:

1. Describe the essential differences between the Bathtub (also known as “Isle de Charles Doucet”) and the Dry World “up there” above the levee as narrated by Hushpuppy.

2. What is your interpretation of the lesson on meat, in particular the message that “everything is part of the buffet of the universe?” or (more generally) What does the film say to us about the universe?

3. Appearing throughout the film, describe the aurochs; how might you explain the significance their presence?

4. Choose just two (2) of the following elements and explain the power of their symbolism throughout the film: the land (or soil), wind, thunder, water, heart beats, food (“feed up time”), the “language” or “talk” of nature (human and otherwise), art, fire, illness/health and medicine. (Of course, as your focused elements interact with others, you are free to include that in your response.)

5. What critical roles do women (especially Miss Bathsheeba) and girls have in the film? What about the visibility of men (other than Wink) and the boys in the film?

6. How would you interpret for a friend the relationship between Wink’s temperament, his illness, and the life and death aspects of the natural world in which he and the others live and die? (A complex question indeed, but you can handle it).

7. What is the relationship between reality, magic and fantasy in the film?

8. What qualities do the Doucet’s possess according to Wink? What is the role of a dad from Hushpuppy’s point of view?

9. What are some of the human reactions to storms? What is your “reading,” of these reactions?

10. How would you interpret the manner in which death is handled in the film? What lessons (or not) might we learn from what we see?

11. What does it mean to “Beast It” in the film?

12. How are race, ethnicity and community depicted in the film? What similarities and/or dissimilarities might these depictions correspond to in your own communal life?

13. What is the significance of the phrase “bunch of pussies” as expressed in the film? What might be some of the phrase’s merits and/or demerits for communal relations and survival in a hard and difficult world, where celebration of life still shines through?
14. How is the care of others demonstrated throughout the film? What lesson might we learn from what we see?

15. Hushpuppy tells us that “Everybody loves the thing that made them.” What lesson(s) about life do you take from Hushpuppy’s wrestling with her father’s illness, and her search for her mother? What is she learning, for example, about the power of courage, love, the “dry world,” and what the scientist of the future will know about her presence in the world?

16. Please construct up to three (3) well-crafted questions that you would like to discuss with Josh Penn if you could speak with him at your favorite hang-in’-out-just-talking-place, or, if presented with the opportunity, at Earlham college during his visit.