Book Club Discussion Questions

1. Harvey has disappointing experiences with the three mentors from his college days (Charlie Garbange, Diggy Tankersly, and June Stabling). Have you had mentors in your life, and, if so, have they ever disappointed you? How?
2. During most of the novel Harvey Sumner seems to be quite unhappy being childless. Do you feel that his discontent was justified? Of the people you know who are childless, how many seem to be satisfied versus dissatisfied with not having kids?
3. The idea of ‘’neoteny’’ or the holding of youthful characteristics (both physical and psychological) as we age is an important theme in *Childless*. Who are the adults you know who have kept more of a ‘’young at heart’’ attitude as they’ve aged. Compare them to other adults you know who seem to grow old without bringing any youthfulness into their later years.
   1. Why is it that some people seem to age more quickly than others?
   2. Does nature (genetic influences) or nurture (environmental influences) seem to be more important in determining whether a person will hold onto their youth as they age?
   3. What does *Childless* suggest are the pluses and the minuses in holding onto youthful traits as a person ages? How is this reflected in the book?
4. Dicuss the essentially ‘’sex negative’’ attitude that Harvey displays in the book. Where do you think he might have picked that up? Does he seem to move toward a more ‘’sex positive’’ attitude by the end of the novel?
5. The tree was an image that crops up throughout the novel. What significance do you think the tree has as a symbol in *Childless*?
6. One of the underlying themes of the book concerns the extent to which today’s culture has robbed children of their childhood (e.g. by forcing them to learn things too early in life via too much academics, exposure to media etc.). To what extent do you agree that childhood is under attack from societal forces in contemporary society?
7. Do you think Harvey was attempting to commit suicide on the beach in Chapter 11? Why or why not?
8. The book uses dark humor to make some of its points about the disappearance of childhood.. To what extent was this approach effective, and did it go too far in your estimation?
9. Neurodiversity is another key theme in *Childless* (e.g. the idea that brain differences like autism and schizophrenia are a normal part of the diversity of humankind)? Which of the neurodiverse character(s) did you most identify with or most appreciate in the book (e.g. Stuart Bonian, Stanley Mills, Stevie ‘’Bug’’ Shervaleski, Brenda Carver, and/or Jonathan Greenluck)? Do you think that *Childless* presents a balanced view of both their strengths and their challenges?
10. The relationship between Harvey and Sharon Sheen had its definite ups and downs. Do you feel that their ‘’romance’’ had any redeeming features for either of them?
11. In some ways, this novel was a story about the struggle between good and evil. How was this reflected in the novel (e.g. who was good and who was evil)? Who won out in the end? How did you feel about that?
12. Genetic engineering makes up a big part of the novel, especially in the second half of the book. Compare *Childless* to other books you’ve read that also have used genetic engineering as a theme. How close do you think today’s scientists are to achieving the kind of genetic effects that are discussed in the novel (e.g. the removal of childhood as a developmental stage of life)?
13. What did you think about the portrayal of the Popcorn Adults in the novel? Did they seem like ‘’cartoon characters’’ to you, or do you actually know people like that in your daily life?
14. What was your overall impression of the last chapter (e.g. post-Maturation society)? Could the same thing actually happen in our society at some point? How would you have ended the book?
15. Did the main character, Dr. Harvey Sumner, seem to get all that he wanted from life by the end of the novel? Why or why not?