

Tier 5 — The Dissection

Discussion Questions

For Funny You Should Ask... and Now What Are We Talking About Here? by Tim Gamble

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This tier runs differently than the ones before it. Each section presents a trait, the generous case for it, and the ungenerous case against it. Read both before you answer. The goal isn't to catch the group agreeing with one side — it's to make them actually weigh the two against each other, using the books themselves as evidence.

This guide assumes the whole group has read both books.

I. Charm, or Privilege

The generous case: Tim's gift with people is real — a genuine warmth and quick wit that disarms judges, cops, and strangers because he treats everyone, including the people with power over him, like a person rather than an obstacle.

The ungenerous case: Tim's gift with people works this reliably because he's a well-spoken young white man that authority figures are already inclined to like. The charm isn't the cause of his good outcomes. It's the explanation he's allowed to believe, because the world never gave him a reason to doubt it.

1. Take one specific moment — the Riverside judge handing back five dollars for gas, or the Thornton watch commander giving him a cot instead of a charge — and argue it honestly from both sides. Which reading survives closer examination?

II. Humor as Courage, or Humor as Avoidance

The generous case: “I didn't get nervous, I got funny” is a real gift — the ability to stay present in a frightening moment instead of freezing, and to bring the people around him along with him.

The ungenerous case: A joke that arrives every single time fear, grief, or consequence gets close isn't presence. It's a permanent exit built into his personality — a way of leaving the room emotionally before anyone, including Tim, has to feel the full weight of what's happening.

2. Try to find one moment in either book where Tim is genuinely afraid and the fear is allowed to simply sit there, unrescued by a joke. Did you find one? What does the answer tell you?

III. Grace, or Talent He Won't Own

The generous case: Tim was carried by something larger than himself — strangers, luck, timing — and his humility about it is sincere. He knows he didn't earn all of it alone.

The ungenerous case: “Grace” is the story a genuinely gifted, resourceful man tells so he never has to say out loud that he's simply better than most people at getting what he wants. Crediting luck is its own kind of quiet self-flattery — it lets him keep the results without claiming the ambition.

3. When Tim talks his way out of a jail cell, a fine, or a bad situation, is that grace happening to him, or is that a skill he is choosing not to name as a skill? Does it matter which one it is?

IV. Aptitude, or Performance

The generous case: Tim had real, demonstrated ability — the IQ test, the instinct for systems and people that built a real career — and the confidence was simply how that ability expressed itself.

The ungenerous case: Confidence performed well enough is indistinguishable from competence to the people watching. Some of what the book calls aptitude may simply be a man who was never afraid to act like he belonged in the room, and the world took his word for it.

4. Think about the punch-card scheme, or the Cronkite-fueled fence business. Was young Tim skilled, or was he simply unafraid — and are those the same thing?

V. Restraint, or Curated Humility

The generous case: Leaving stories out — a whole summer, an entire cross-country trip, things he calls “better off unexamined” — is genuine privacy and a real ethic of not building himself up at someone else’s expense.

The ungenerous case: Choosing what to withhold is still a choice about the image you want the reader to hold. A man who curates his own humility this carefully may be performing modesty as skillfully as he performs charm.

5. If the missing material turned out to complicate the charming version of Tim rather than merely stay private, would that change how you read everything he did include? What does your answer say about how much trust a memoir actually asks of its reader?

VI. Untouched by Consequence, or Shielded From It

The generous case: Nineteen arrests, no convictions, reflects a genuinely different, freer era, and a young man who treated the people who held power over him with enough respect that they extended it back.

The ungenerous case: Read as a plain record rather than a story — repeated encounters with police, repeated release without consequence — the pattern looks less like charm and more like what it looks like when the rules that bind other people quietly don’t apply to you.

6. Read the arrest record in this book the way a stranger with no affection for Tim would read it. Does it still sound like a charmed life?

Before You Reach a Verdict — The Counter-Evidence

A real dissection has to weigh the case for the defense too. Before the group lands anywhere, sit with these:

- In the psychologist chapter, a stranger catches Tim reframing his own evasions three separate times — and three separate times, Tim corrects himself honestly rather than defending the more flattering version.
 - In the pneumonia crisis, Tim is not funny. He is frightened, humiliated, and entirely dependent on Sandy fighting for him when he cannot fight for himself.
 - On the subject of Vietnam, Tim refuses the easy exit available to him: “the only ones I have to apologize to are the men and women who took my place.” He does not let himself off the hook the way the rest of the book might suggest he would.
 - When he’s fired after twenty-three years, the book does not spin it into a win. It stays a loss, plainly, for as long as a loss actually lasts.
7. Do these moments genuinely complicate the ungenerous readings above, or are they simply further evidence of the same charm operating at a more sophisticated level — the humility performed so well it reads as proof against the case that he’s performing at all?

The Verdict

8. Having argued both sides of every trait above, what is your honest, final read of the man in these pages — not the version the books ask you to see, but the version the evidence actually supports?

9. Is it possible for all of it to be true at once — that he is genuinely charmed, genuinely gifted, genuinely restrained, and genuinely privileged, all in the same body, none of it canceling the others out? Or does a real verdict require choosing?

10. Now that the group has actually argued this out loud — where does the room land, and where does it split? And if it splits, what does that split tell you about the two of you, and not just about Tim?

This tier doesn't ask you to forgive Tim or condemn him. It asks you to look as closely as the book allows and see what's actually there. Whatever the room decides, that closeness is the discovery — not the verdict itself.

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Facilitator Notes

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A NOTE FOR THE FACILITATOR

Every section has a generous case and an ungenerous case. Read both aloud before opening the floor — don't let the group jump straight to whichever side they already favor.

The counter-evidence section near the end is the part most groups will want to rush past to get back to the sharper material. Don't let them. It's the part that makes this a dissection instead of a takedown, and skipping it produces a lopsided, less honest conversation.

- 1. Charm, or Privilege.** Ask the group to run the same scene twice — once imagining Tim as written, once imagining a young man the system was inclined to distrust on sight. *Does the outcome of the scene survive the swap?*
- 2. Humor as Courage, or Avoidance.** This is a genuine search question — the group actually has to hunt through both books for a counterexample. If they can't find one, that absence is itself the answer. *What does it mean if a careful search turns up nothing?*
- 3. Grace, or Talent He Won't Own.** The distinction here is subtle — luck happening to you versus skill you decline to name. *Ask the group for the sharpest possible one-line difference between the two, and see if they can actually draw it.*
- 4. Aptitude, or Performance.** Confidence and competence look identical from the outside. *Has anyone in the room ever gotten away with the same thing — sounding sure enough that no one checked?*
- 5. Restraint, or Curated Humility.** This one turns the lens on the reader's trust, not just Tim's honesty. *How much unverified trust is the group comfortable extending to any memoirist, regardless of who it is?*
- 6. Untouched, or Shielded.** Have someone in the group literally read the arrest count aloud, flatly, with no surrounding story — just the number and the outcome. *Does it still sound charming stripped of Tim's voice?*
- 7. Complicating evidence, or deeper performance.** This is deliberately the hardest question in the whole set, because it questions whether the counter-evidence itself can be trusted. *If the group can't agree, can they at least agree on what evidence would settle it — even if that evidence doesn't exist in the book?*

8. The verdict. Push for specificity here. *A vague answer means the group hasn't actually done the work — ask for the one piece of evidence each person's verdict rests on most.*

9. Can it all be true at once. This is the philosophical crux of the whole tier. *Is refusing to choose intellectual honesty, or just another way of being generous to Tim without admitting it?*

10. Closing question. Where the room splits matters as much as where it agrees. *Can each side explain not just their read of Tim, but why they think the other side sees it differently — what in their own life or values is doing that work?*

This tier doesn't ask the group to forgive Tim or condemn him — only to look as closely as the book allows.

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