

**Reading Guide**  
**Sarah Vowell's *The Partly Cloudy Patriot***  
**Reading in the Region**

**Spring 2006**

**Note:** This guide is meant to help you think of ideas as you read the text. You do not have to answer all or any of the questions; instead, you can use them to inspire or prompt thought. In the same manner, you should feel free to read the essays in Vowell's text at your leisure, pace, and focus. Individuals may participate in this initiative to the level of each person's comfort—read, think, gather, and discuss to the extent that you wish. We look forward to many interesting and fruitful conversations as our community experiences Sara Vowell's *The Partly Cloudy Patriot* and the issues it evokes.

- In the epigraph to the book, Walt Whitman states the following after witnessing Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, "After every great battle, a great storm. Even civic events, the same." What does he mean? How does this statement relate to the historical, cultural, and/or civic events Vowell addresses in her essays? Do you agree with Whitman? Why or why not? Does Vowell agree with Whitman? Why or why not?

**“What He Said There”**

- At different points in this essay, Vowell addresses Lincoln as a writer. What does she say about his words? What connection does this have to the recurring theme of political writing and speeches in this text? What role do Lincoln and his words play for Vowell?
- What is our current relation to the history of our country as individuals and/or as groups? How do we react to and/or at particular sites or commemorative events? What relationship do we have with the figures of our nation's history? How is that relationship formed? Does it change with age?
- Vowell records that James McPherson “accuse[d] the audience of taking our democracy for granted” (7). Do you think we take our democracy for granted? Why or why not? How do we take our democracy for granted? Do you take our democracy for granted?
- According to Vowell, Gary Wills describes the effect of Lincoln's words/ideas in 1863 as follows: “The crowd departed with a new thing in its ideological luggage, that new constitution Lincoln had substituted for the one they brought there with them. They walked off, from those curving graves on the hillside, under a changed sky, into a different America” (8). Reread the Gettysburg Address. How did its ideas change America? Have these ideas been realized in actuality (have we achieved them)? What other speeches or events have radically changed America?

**“The First Thanksgiving”**

- In this essay, Vowell focuses on family dynamics by discussing a particular holiday. What does she say about how families interact? How does she connect that interaction with our history and/or our nature as citizens of this country?
- Vowell states, “[E]very generation moves away from the one before” (12). Do you think this is a true pattern in the United States? Why would each generation choose to move? Why would some generations choose to stay in the same location? Is this true for your family?
- Vowell’s comic association of being in charge of the dressing with growing up and eventually dying (13) might ring a bell with some. What rites of passage in your lives made you realize that you were an *adult*? Why did these events cause this realization? How do these realizations then lead to a sense of our mortality?

### **“Ike was a Handsome Man”**

- What lessons does Vowell suggest that Clinton learn from the four presidential libraries she visits? Do you agree with any or all of these lessons? Why or why not?
- What is the purpose of a presidential library?
- Have you ever visited a presidential library? If so, which one and what was it like?
- Of the libraries she describes, which two does Vowell like best and why? Even if you haven’t visited these libraries, which do you think you would prefer based on Vowell’s description and why?
- Vowell states, “Americans like contradictions” (30). Vowell directly and indirectly expresses this idea in various places throughout the book. What evidence does she give for this statement here and elsewhere in the text? Do you agree with this assertion? Why or why not?

### **“God Will Give You Blood to Drink in a Souvenir Shot Glass”**

- Vowell’s title for this essay is a revision of Sarah Good’s 1692 proclamation of what would occur if the town killed her for being a witch (35). Discuss the additions to Good’s statement made by Vowell. How do these change the tone and message of the statement? What connection does this revision have to the focus and message of the essay?
- What is the relationship between tourism and historical events, personages, and places?
- Vowell suggests that a rut in a stone marking the Rue St. Séverin is a good “picture of history itself” (33). Discuss whether you agree with her or not and why?
- What two “domestic bloodbaths” are Vowell’s “favorites” and why?
- Vowell suggests that the “central tensions of American life” are “the conflict between freedom and community, between individual will and the public good” (33). Do you agree with Vowell? Why or why not?

- Vowell discusses “scary sermons and Lincoln’s speeches” as some of the “greatest American writing” (33). Discuss the merits of this categorization.
- In this essay as well as the “What He Said There” and “Ike Was a Handsome Man,” Vowell focuses quite a bit on presidential writing. Discuss her attitude toward the writing/speeches of Lincoln, Kennedy, and others throughout the book.
- Discuss the irony of souvenirs.
- Vowell’s friend tells her that Vowell is ambivalent about history (39 ff.), which is why Vowell journeys to the various sites that she does. Do you think this is a plausible reason for visiting the sites that commemorate tragic and/or horrific events?
- Vowell addresses her “It Could Be Worse” motto (40). How does she use this in relation to her historical tourism? Is this similar to or different from your reaction to such places or thoughts about the past?
- What should we learn from the past and why?
- How does history fill the world up with stories, according to Vowell? What sort of historical information have you learned that tells a story of an item, ritual, or place in your life?

#### **“The New German Cinema”**

- In this essay, Vowell focuses on her inverted intellectual growth, which moved from the seemingly more sophisticated German *cinema* to the world of *movies*. What is the distinction here related to the media of film?
- What is the relationship between films and real life?
- Films/movies occupy a unique space in Vowell’s book. What role do they play in key essays? Does she discuss or use the films of Woody Allen in the same way that she wields those of Tom Cruise or others?

#### **“Democracy and Things Like That”**

- Compare the reaction the students had to Gore to the media’s response to him within this essay. The students in this essay had particular reactions to the media’s handling of Gore’s statements. Do you agree or disagree with the students’ attitudes here.
- Vowell repeats the idea that one little word changed the whole idea of what Gore was trying to express. Discuss this idea. In addition, what role does listening and how we listen play in the issues here?

- What role do political speeches play in “‘democracy and things like that’,” or how can people’s words influence our political ideas?
- The goals on McGlynn's syllabus (58-9) relate to examining, thinking about, and challenging the messages we receive in texts. Do you think that examining and thinking are important to participating as a citizen in the United States? Why or why not?

### **“Pop-a-Shot”**

- Vowell suggests that goofing off is an “obligation of American citizenship” (61). Discuss what she means and whether or not you agree with her.
- What is the difference between real basketball and activities like pop-a-shot?
- What is the value of pop-a-shot and things like it?

### **“California is an Island”**

- Why does Vowell say that California is “about the good life” (68), and what does she mean by this? How does she contrast this with Philadelphia? What ideas do you have about particular locations?
- Compare the locations depicted on maps to Arader’s selling of them (70 ff.) How are they similar according to Vowell? Does Arader sell history (73)?
- What stories do the maps tell, according to Vowell (74 ff.)? What contradictory associations does Vowell make between the stories that are told and those that are not?
- Vowell discusses seeing the good and bad in things (77). Which do you tend to do? What is the value of each approach and/or of both approaches together in terms of discussing our history?

### **“Dear Dead Congressman”**

- In a letter Vowell received from Congressman Synar when she was eight years old, Synar stated, “Don’t forget that when you become eighteen you should get registered to vote. Get involved in government and our government will be better” (80). Vowell recalls how she “pined to vote” (81), links this idea to a character from *The Breakfast Club*, Brian, who has a fake ID so that he can vote (81), and recalls David Letterman’s objection to being labeled a “non-voting Republican” (82 ff.). Are you registered to vote, and do you vote in various elections? Why or why not? Do you think your vote makes a difference? Why or why not and how?
- Vowell categorizes *voting* as “a kind of prayer” as per the dictionary definition of *suffrage* (85). What does she mean here? Do you agree? How would you describe, define, or categorize voting and its relevance to you, your community, and our country?

### **“The Nerd Voice”**

- What does Vowell mean by the term “nerd voice” after which this essay is titled, and what is its purpose or effect?
- When Vowell calls the Internet the “nerd Israel” (87), what does she mean?
- Kevin, one of Vowell’s friends, asserts that going to Bush’s inauguration despite their despair over his becoming President will show that they “were not willing to let American democracy—to let America—die without standing up and being counted” (89). He follows this statement with a particular definition of a “true American”: “to stand up for what we believe in without illusions, without any real hope that we will be able to change anything” (89-90). What do you think standing up for American democracy and being a true American mean? How do is your definition similar to and/or different from Kevin’s and/or Vowell’s as she defines it throughout the book?
- In this essay, Vowell and her friends listen to Bush’s inaugural address, and she later refers to Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address (98) as she does in “What He Said There” and “The Partly Cloudy Patriot.” How does Vowell feel about these two inaugural addresses? In listening to any of the more recent inaugural addresses, what did you think? DO you recall any aspect in particular?
- Discussing Gore as a *geek*, *nerd*, or *dork*, Vowell addresses our culture’s attitude toward smart people and its effect on politics. Do Americans value intelligence? What is the evidence that suggests we either do or do not value intelligence? Should the president be intelligent? Why or why not?
- Discuss Vowell’s metaphor of high school for the 2000 presidential campaign (109). Does this metaphor work? Why or why not?
- Vowell ends the essay with a longer paragraph cataloging the various characteristics she wishes were valued in a president (116-117). The list is quite eclectic, and some of the pieces of knowledge and/or abilities may not seem to be necessary for the job description here. What does she mean for each? With which of these characteristics do you agree or disagree? Why?

### **“Rosa Parks, *C’est Moi*”**

- Why does Vowell object to individuals comparing themselves to Rosa Parks? How do you feel about such comparisons?
- Vowell discusses the bravery and significance of Rosa Park actions (122). If you were going to describe Rosa Parks’ significance, how would you do so?
- To what other figures in American history do people compare themselves? Are there other figures who did such amazing things that it would be illogical to compare ourselves to them?

### **“Tom Cruise Makes Me Nervous”**

- Why does Tom Cruise make Vowell nervous? What are your reactions to Cruise? What other actors or actresses make you nervous? Why?
- Vowell writes, “The mark of a great performance is that it obliterates distance, gets under our skin” (129). What does she mean? What do you think the characteristics of a great performance are?

### **“ Underground Lunchroom”**

- Why do tourists visit our national parks? What is the purpose of these parks? Have you ever visited a national park? If so, which one? What were your reactions to it? If you haven’t visited one, why not?
- What are the reasons some people give for getting rid of or for saving the underground lunchroom in Carlsbad Caverns National Park? Do you think they should keep it or get rid of it? Why?
- Briefly addressing her life, which involves both an objection to the abuse of the timber industry and the ownership of a maple bookcase, Vowell points to the contradictory lives of American. How are or are not our lives contradictory?
- Discussing Shepard hitting golf balls on the moon, Vowell states, “That’s what we Americans do when we find a place that’s really special. We go there and act exactly like ourselves” (140). What does Vowell mean here? What other options exist for behavior in new locations? Do you agree with her? How do you act when you visit new locations and/or special places? Does and/or should our location influence our behavior?

### **“Wonder Twins”**

- The title of this essay and the first paragraph on page 144 refer to a statement a set of twins often repeated on *Superfriends*, and Vowell discusses her life as a twin, yet the article addresses a photo of twins who were the leaders of a guerilla army. Discuss the effect of the similarities and differences in the various aspects of the lives of twins between this cartoon, Vowell’s life, and the lives of Luther and Johnny Htoo.
- Are you a twin, or do you know anyone who is a twin? Which (if any) of Vowell’s experiences as a twin sound familiar/common or odd?

### **“Cowboys vs. Mounties”**

- What is the difference, according to Vowell, between a cowboy and mountie?
- What do each of these figures (cowboys or Mounties) symbolize in relation to their respective country’s history?
- The “cowboy ethic” of individuality (vs. the conformity of the mountie, 153) is part of an American identity. Do you agree or disagree?

## **“The Partly Cloudy Patriot”**

- Vowell asks, “Isn’t art supposed to improve life?” (155). What is art supposed to do? What is the purpose and value of art?
- Vowell discusses the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, suggesting that the ideas in the former are “so just, and yet so wonderfully whimsical” (156) and pointing to her perception of the two documents as “like the A side and B side of the greatest single ever released” (157). What does she mean here, and do you agree? Do you similarly forget what occurred between the writing of these two documents?
- What is a *patriot*? Does it differ according to the country in which a person lives? What is an *American patriot*? How does your definition of *patriot* differ from or resemble Vowell’s definition?
- What does the flag mean, according to Vowell? What does the flag mean to you?
- Did September 11<sup>th</sup> have the effect on American patriotism and democracy that Vowell suggests? Why or why not?
- Vowell suggests that the “suspicion of Washington” is “one of the most American emotions an American can have” (159). Why would Vowell say this, and do you agree?
- The title of this book and of this essay comes from a reference to the “summer soldier and the sunshine patriot” in the writings of Thomas Paine (162). What did Paine mean by these terms? What does Vowell mean by “the partly cloudy patriot” (163)? What caused her to coin this term?
- Is this the “Land of Opportunity” to which Vowell refers (163)?
- What has Vowell learned from different national events? What have you learned from specific national events? Why was that the lesson?
- Why is the Civil War Vowell’s “favorite American metaphor” (168)?
- Vowell suggests that her “ideal picture of citizenship will always be an argument” (169). What does she mean by this? What is your “ideal picture of citizenship” or the citizen? What are the responsibilities and rights of a citizen?
- Riding the train, Vowell notices a sign that reads, “If you are sick, you will not be left alone” (171), and she later calls this statement the “epitome of civilization, good government, i.e., the crux of the societal impulse” (171). Why? Do you agree? Why or why not?

## **“State of the Union”**

- Given Vowell’s numerous references to political speeches and the delivery of such a speech so titled by the President, Vowell’s title would seemingly call to mind such speeches, yet the essay is a laundry list of eclectic items. What is the relationship between the title and the items listed? To what do these items add up in relation to each other? What does Vowell want them to mean? How might they relate to the state of this country?

### **“Tom Landry, an Existentialist”**

- What is an *existentialist*? How does Tom Landry fit this definition according to Vowell?

### **“The Strenuous Life”**

- What lessons does Vowell learn from Teddy Roosevelt’s life?
- Roosevelt equated loneliness with the plains landscape (185). What emotions do you equate with particular places? Why can or do specific places make us feel particular ways?
- Vowell begins a discussion of hunting after seeing a buffalo, and she recounts her sister’s experience. Have you ever been hunting? Did you hit anything? What were your reactions?
- Vowell’s friend, Matt, uses the term a “geographic” (195). What does this term mean? Do you think that where we live influences the quality of our lives?
- Vowell ends the book with the image of laughing Teddy Roosevelt and the statement, “That guy really knew how to live” (196). What is the effect of this image and statement? What aspects of Roosevelt’s mode of living does Vowell appreciate? What would you mean if you said that someone really knew how to live?

### **Some General Topics for Discussion & Related Overarching Questions**

- Rejection/changing of ideals
  - How/why do some people change their beliefs/ideals as they grow up?
- Liberal vs. conservative beliefs/opposing viewpoints
  - There are divergent viewpoints in Vowell’s text (liberal vs. conservative; Pentecostal vs atheist). Why do people have such different beliefs, values, and attitudes? How can people with such disparate beliefs, values, and attitudes agree on issues of national concern?
  - Do you and your family agree or disagree on issues of politics or religion?
- The relationship of between the present and the past
  - What is the relationship between the present and the past? What is the significance of our nation’s history to our present existence, way of life, and/or beliefs?
- Pop culture, including movies and TV shows
  - Why does Vowell so frequently weave references to pop culture throughout her discussion of “serious” topics? What is the effect?
  - What lessons can pop culture teach us?

- Tourists and souvenirs
  - Why do tourists visit particular sites? Why do we visit historical sites in particular? Why do they buy souvenirs? What particular places have you visited? Why? What do you remember about the visit? What souvenirs did you buy? Why?
- Locations
  - Do locations have particular meaning for people? Can location(s) influence a person's quality of life? Why do you live where you do? How does where you live influence the way you live and what you do or believe? Can people influence location/place?
  - What are some of your favorite places and why?
- Political speeches
  - Discuss Vowell's repeated treatment of the nature and role of political speeches. What is the purpose of a political speech? Describe the quality and nature of today's political speeches. How do these speeches compare with the historical speeches?
- Politics
  - Describe your perception of American politics. Do you agree or disagree with particular aspects of how Vowell portrays American politics?
- Elections
  - Describe a particular election that you followed. Have you ever worked on an election campaign? What are your reactions to and/or your feelings about the presidential elections? Other elections? Have you ever tried to run for office? What did you learn in the process?
- Democracy
  - What does *democracy* mean to you? What are the characteristics and evidence of democracy?
- Citizenship
  - What does it mean to be a *citizen*? What are the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship?
- Patriotism
  - What is a *patriot*? Has the meaning changed over time? How or why? Would you describe yourself as a patriot? Why or why not?
- Families
  - What is the stereotype of the American family? How does Vowell's discussion of her family play into and/or depart from this stereotype? What is the nature of the American family? Is there one particular type and/or interaction style?
- History
  - What is the role and effect of history?
- Americans
  - What does it mean to be an American? What are the characteristics of an American?
- American writing

--What are some of the major pieces of American writing? How did they shape our country and its citizens? What is your favorite piece of American writing and why?

- National events

What national events have shaped the United States the most dramatically or profoundly and why? Are those events commemorated in any manner?