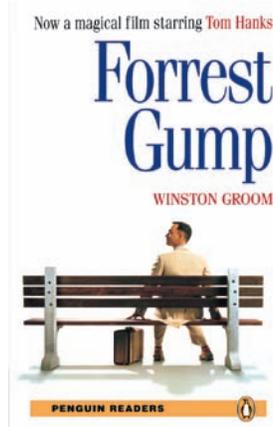




Forrest Gump

Winston Groom



About the author

Winston Groom was born in 1945. He was brought up in Mobile, Alabama, on the Gulf of Mexico. His father was a lawyer, and it was expected that Groom would follow in his father's footsteps. However, while at university, Groom realised that he wanted to be a journalist and a writer instead. In 1966, he was drafted into the army. He spent eleven months in Vietnam. 'I did my job and got the hell out of there,' he recalls.

Groom worked as a successful journalist, but he walked away from his job in order to write his first novel, a book about Vietnam called *Better Times Than These*. Published in 1978, the book was a critical and commercial success. Groom spent the next eight years living in New York, writing several books, including *As Summers Die* (1980) and *Conversations with the Enemy* (1984), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize.

In 1986, the author returned to Alabama. He became inspired by a story that his father had told him about a mentally challenged man who excelled at playing the piano. Groom wrote *Forrest Gump* in six weeks. 'I had a few notes jotted down in the afternoon, and by midnight, the first chapter was finished,' he says. The book received good reviews and sold well. Groom then met his future wife, Anne, who is twenty-three years younger than he is. They remain happily married.

In 1994, the film *Forrest Gump* was released. By the end of the next year, the book had sold 1.7 million copies. Groom wrote *Gumpisms: The Wit and Wisdom of Forrest Gump*, a book of Forrest Gump's sayings. In 1995, Groom's *Shrouds of Glory* was published, which was followed by his sequel to *Forrest Gump – Gump & Co.* Now, however, Groom insists that Forrest Gump is retired for good.

Summary

When most people hear the phrase 'Forrest Gump', they think of the successful film that was released in 1994. However, the novel *Forrest Gump*, on which the film is based, is extraordinary in its own right. It is a superbly imaginative retelling of the last forty years of American history.

The book is written in the first-person, so readers feel that someone is telling them his life story. It narrates the adventures of Forrest Gump, an 'idiot savant'. Forrest has a low IQ (intelligence quotient), but he is brilliant in certain areas, for example, mathematics. At school, children laugh at him. Only pretty Jenny Curran is kind to him. Then it is discovered that Forrest is very good at running and playing football. As a result, he eventually receives a football scholarship at a university. By now, it is the late 1960s. Forrest is drafted into the army and goes to fight in the Vietnam War. He leaves Vietnam as a hero, and he is even awarded a medal by the U.S. President.

It is only the first of several extraordinary adventures for Forrest. He meets Jenny again, and they become lovers for a short time. Then NASA, the space centre in Texas, sends Forrest into space with an ape called Sue. Back on Earth, Forrest becomes an international chess champion. He also starts a shrimping business in Bayou. Then he hears that Jenny is married, and he learns how it feels to have a broken heart: 'A part of me seemed to die when I heard it'. He drowns his sorrows in work and becomes very wealthy.

Time passes. Forrest takes a holiday and meets Jenny again. It turns out that her child, who is also called Forrest, is actually his son. Forrest wants Jenny back, but he realises that it is better for his son 'not to have an idiot for a father'. The story ends with Forrest giving all his money to Jenny, his mother and his friends. For Forrest, it is time to start again.

About the film

Forrest Gump is one of the most successful films of all time. It enjoyed widespread critical and popular success. It was discussed on TV and in newspapers all around the world. During the height of 'Gump Mania', people wore T-shirts expressing Forrest Gump's sayings, for example, 'Life is like a box of chocolates' and 'Stupid is as stupid does'. The film was awarded all the major Oscars at the 1994 Academy Awards in Hollywood, and it earned its starring actor, Tom Hanks, his second Best Actor award in two years.



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Background and themes

The American film critic Roger Ebert described the film *Forrest Gump* as 'a meditation on our times, as seen through the eyes of a man who lacks cynicism and takes things exactly as they are'. It is an apt description of both the film and the book. Forrest is hugely disadvantaged, and yet because he is innocent and brave, he emerges triumphant in the end.

The book has several levels to it. At one level, it is a comedy – a wild fantasy that veers from one amazing event to the next. At another level, the novel takes readers on an amusing ride through recent American history. It laughs at some of America's heroes, forcing readers to see the country's history from a completely different viewpoint. In particular, the novel provides readers with a fresh perspective on the 1960s (the 'hippy era'), on the controversial war in Vietnam and on young America's outraged reaction to it.

Part of the book's irony stems from the fact that Forrest, who is generally regarded as an idiot, ends up becoming (among other things) a war hero, a chess champion, an astronaut and a pro wrestler. The message of the book seems to be that you can become whomever you choose to become – but does Forrest really choose his life? Perhaps it is just blind luck that leads to his extraordinary adventures. Or perhaps destiny lies at the root of his amazing life. Either way, like any great book, *Forrest Gump* leaves the task of uncovering its message in the hands of the reader.

Discussion activities

Chapters 1–2

Before reading

- Discuss:** Ask students if they have ever seen the film version of *Forrest Gump*. *Did you like the film? Why or why not? Do you remember any of the characters in the story?* List the characters the students mention on the board, and then ask them to find pictures of the characters in the book.
- Discuss:** Divide the class into two groups – one made up of students who have seen the film *Forrest Gump* and one made up of students who haven't seen the film. Then get them to look at the picture on the cover of the book and discuss the following questions:
What does the man look like?
How old do you think the man is?
What kind of clothes is the man wearing?
What is the man doing?
Where is he doing it?

What do you think the man's character is like? Why do you think this?

- Pair work:** Put students into pairs and get them to look up the word *gump* ('a foolish or stupid person') either in a dictionary or on the Internet. Make the exercise into a competition – the first pair of students to find the definition wins. They should stand up and read the definition out loud to the rest of the class.

After reading

- Write:** *Would you like to have Forrest as a friend? Why or why not?* Get students to write a sentence to answer these questions.
- Discuss:** Get students to look at the picture on page 3. *How do you think Forrest is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think Jenny is feeling? Why do you think this? How do you think the boys are feeling? Why do you think this?*

Chapters 3–4

Before reading

- Guess:** Ask students to predict what will happen to Forrest in Chapters 3 and 4. *Will he see Jenny again? Will he stay at university? Will his team win the big game? Will he go to Vietnam? What will happen to him there?*
- Research:** Ask students to bring information about Vietnam to class. Put a large piece of paper on the wall and then get students to attach their information to the piece of paper to make a wall display.

After reading

- Check:** Review students' predictions about what would happen to Forrest in Chapters 3 and 4. Check if their predictions were right or wrong.
- Role play:** Put students into pairs and get them to role play the scene in which Forrest meets Bubba (page 6). When they have finished, some of the pairs should role play the scene in front of the class.

Chapters 5–6

Before reading

- Pair work:** Teach the word *danger* to students. Put them into pairs and get them to ask each other if they have ever been in danger. *If so, when and where did the event take place? What happened? What did you do? How did you feel? If not, how do you think it feels to be in danger? Would you like to be in danger? Why or why not?*

After reading

- Write:** Get students to look at the picture on page 15 and write a paragraph to describe what is happening in the picture. You can start the activity by asking them the following questions:
Where is Forrest?
What is he doing?
Why is he doing it?



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*How do you think he is feeling?
Why do you think this?*

Chapters 7–8

Before reading

12 Pair work: *Why do you think Jenny wants Forrest to throw away his medal?* Put students into pairs and get them to ask each other this question.

After reading

13 Read carefully: Get students to read the last five paragraphs of Chapter 8 as a class. Each student should stand up and carefully read one sentence out loud until the entire section has been read.

Chapters 9–10

Before reading

14 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 9 is called 'A Real Idiot'. *What does 'real' mean? Who do you think the 'real idiot' in this chapter is? Why do you think this?*

After reading

15 Role play: Write the following names on pieces of paper – Bubba, Bubba's daddy, Donald, Honest Ivan, Mike, Mr Tribble, Raquel Welch and Sue. Photocopy the pieces of paper as necessary. Divide the class into groups of eight and give each student in the group a different piece of paper. The students should introduce themselves to the group, explain how they first met Forrest and talk about what they think of him. They shouldn't say the name of their character. When the student has finished, the other students should guess which character he or she is.

Chapters 11–12

Before reading

16 Discuss: Ask students to think about why Chapter 12 is called 'Little Forrest'. *Who do you think 'Little Forrest' is?*

After reading

17 Discuss: *Why does Forrest think that it is better for the boy to be with Jenny and her husband instead of with him?* Get students to work in small groups and think of answers to this question.

18 Discuss: Get students who have seen the film *Forrest Gump* to discuss the following questions:
How is the film different from the book? Which do you prefer – the book or the film? Why do you feel this way?
Get students who haven't seen the film *Forrest Gump* to discuss the following questions:
How would you change the book to make it into a film? Which parts would you cut out? Why would you do this? Which parts would you keep? Why would you do this?

Vocabulary activities

For the Word List and vocabulary activities, go to www.penguinreaders.com.