If you say 'Forrest Gump' to people, most will think of the major film success of 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; the reader feels that someone is telling them his life story. It narrates the adventures of Forrest Gump, an 'idiot savant'. Forrest has a low IQ (intelligence), but 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 the boy is brilliant at running and football. As a result, he gets into university. By now it’s the late sixties. Forrest is drafted into the army and goes to fight in Vietnam. He leaves Vietnam a hero and is awarded a medal by President Nixon.

This is only the beginning of many strange adventures. Forrest meets Jenny again; they become lovers for a short while. NASA, the space centre in Texas, sends Forrest into space with an ape called Sue! Back on the ground, Forrest becomes a chess champion. He starts a shrimping business in Bayou. Then he hears that Jenny is married: ‘A part of me seemed to die when I heard it’. He drowns his sorrows in work and becomes a wealthy man.

Time passes. Forrest takes a holiday and by chance meets Jenny. She is indeed married but her child, called Forrest, is his. Forrest wants Jenny back but he realizes that it is better for his son ‘not to have an idiot for a father’. The story ends with Forrest giving all his money away to Jenny, his mother and friends. It’s time to start again.

The American Winston Groom, born in 1945, was brought up in the Deep South, in Mobile, on the Gulf of Mexico. His father was a lawyer and it was expected that Winston would follow in his footsteps. But at university, Winston realized he wanted to be a journalist and writer.

In 1966 he was drafted into the army, and spent eleven months in Vietnam. Of this experience he says, ‘I did my job and got the hell out of there’.

Groom then worked as a successful journalist but walked away from his job in order to write his first novel. This was a book about Vietnam called Better Times Than These. Published in 1978, it was a critical and commercial success. Groom spent the next eight years in New York and during this time wrote 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 his father had told him; it was about a retarded man who could only do one thing well, and that was play 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 got good reviews and sold well. Groom then met and married his wife Anne, who is twenty-three years younger than him - they share their bed with their large, lovable sheepdog, Forrest Gump.

In 1994 the film ‘Forrest Gump’ was released. A year later the book had sold 1.7 million copies. Hastily, Groom wrote Gumpisms: The Wit and Wisdom of Forrest Gump. This is a book of Forrest Gump’s sayings. In 1995, Groom’s Shrouds of Glory was published. This was followed by his sequel to Forrest Gump, Gump & Co.

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’. This is an apt description of both film and book. Forrest is hugely disadvantaged - yet
because he is innocent and brave, he emerges triumphant.

The book has several levels to it. At one level it is a comedy, a wild fantasy. It veers from one strange event to another. At another level the novel takes us on an amusing ride through recent American history. In doing so it laughs at America's heroes, and we see history from a completely different viewpoint. In particular, the novel gives us a fresh perspective on the sixties - the 'hippy era' - and on the war in Vietnam, and young America’s outraged reaction to it.

Part of the irony of the book is that Forrest, the 'idiot', becomes (amongst other things) a war hero, a chess champion, an astronaut, a wrestler. So what, ultimately, is the message of the book? That you can be who you choose to be? Does Forrest Gump really choose his life? Is it luck or destiny that causes his strange adventures? Perhaps that is for you, the reader, to decide.

Communicative activities

The following teacher-led activities cover the same sections of text as the exercises at the back of the reader, and supplement those exercises. For supplementary exercises covering shorter sections of the book, see the photocopyable Student’s Activities pages of this Factsheet. These are primarily for use with class readers but, with the exception of discussion and pair/groupwork questions, can also be used by students working alone in a self-access centre.

ACTIVITIES BEFORE READING THE BOOK

Divide the class into groups. Find out which students have seen the film ‘Forrest Gump’ and put them in groups together. Put students who have not seen the film in groups together. Ask them to look at the cover of the book. Teach the words character and appearance. Ask them to answer these questions:

(a) Describe the man’s appearance.
(b) What do you think his character is like?

Get answers first from the groups that haven’t seen the film. Then get answers from the groups that have seen the film. The answers will be different!

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING A SECTION

Chapters 1-4
Put students into pairs. They discuss the following question. Encourage them to be honest with themselves.

Would you like to have Forrest as a friend? Say why/why not.

Chapters 5-8
Put students into pairs. Students write down all the really strange things that have happened to Forrest. (For example, meeting the President, living in the jungle.) Then they answer Forrest’s question: ‘Why do things like that always happen to me?’

Chapter 9-12
Write the names below on pieces of paper. Photocopy them as necessary. Divide the class into groups of seven. Give each person in the group a piece of paper with a different role. Students have to introduce themselves to the group and talk a little about how they met Forrest Gump and what they think of him. They must not say their name. The other students then say who this person is:

Mr Tribble, Sue, Mike, Raquel Welch, Honest Ivan, Bubba's daddy, Donald

ACTIVITIES AFTER READING THE BOOK

1 Divide the class into groups: put those who have seen the film into groups together, and those who have not see the film into groups together. Ask those who have seen the film these questions:

How is the film different from the book? Which do you prefer, the film or the book? Say why. Which ending do you think is best?

Ask those who have not seen the film these questions:

You are making a film of this book. Who would you choose to play Forrest and Jenny? How would you change the book to make it into a good film? What parts would you cut?

2 In small groups, students discuss the following:

Forrest Gump ends with the words: ‘An idiot? Yes, I’m an idiot. But most of the time I just try to do the right thing.’

Do you think that’s true? Give examples of when Forrest tries to do the right thing. Are there any times in the book when he does the wrong thing? What is the result of this?

Then have a whole-class discussion about the subject.

Glossary

It will be useful for your students to know the following new words. They are practised in the ‘Before You Read’ sections of exercises at the back of the book. (Definitions are based on those in the Longman Active Study Dictionary.)

Chapters 1-4

army (n) a large number of soldiers who are fighting together
boiler (n) a piece of equipment that heats water
coach (n) a person who teaches you a sport
goal (n) the space between two tall pieces of wood, into which you try to kick the ball in games
grenade (n) this is thrown or fired from a gun; it destroys things
harmonica (n) this is small and metal; if you push air into it, it makes music
idiot (n) this person’s brain has not completely finished growing
jungle (n) a thick forest in hot countries

Chapters 5-8

ape (n) a large animal, like a human
chess (n) a game with pieces that you move on a piece of flat wood; the flat wood has black and white squares
colonel (n) a high job in the army (see above)
medal (n) a piece of metal, usually round, which is given to people when they do something special in a war
net (n) this is used for catching fish; the water goes through it but the fish are too big to go through it
shrimp (n) a very small, pink sea animal with ten legs and a cover which is a little hard

Chapters 9-12

actor (n) this person acts in films and at the theatre
bet (v) to say, ‘I think this will happen. I bet £10 that it will happen.’ If it happens, you win money. If it doesn’t happen, you lose your money.
tournament (n) when a lot of people play a game and all want to win
wrestle (v) to try to throw somebody to the ground (arm-wrestle: to try to push somebody’s hand and arm down)

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Activities before reading the book

1. Read the introduction in your book. Then put these words together to make complete sentences.
   (a) One day when Curtis had to change the wheel on the car,
   (b) I was born an idiot
   (c) It doesn’t matter if you are rich or poor,
   (d) Forrest Gump is an unusual man
   (e) Tom Hanks won an Oscar
   (f) He wins a medal
   (i) for the film in 1994.
   (ii) who does a lot of unusual things.
   (iii) but I’m cleverer than most people think.
   (iv) for being very brave in the Vietnam War.
   (v) you can be anything you want to be.
   (vi) I helped him.

2. Look at the names of these chapters? What do you think will happen in them?
   Chapter 5: Danger in the Jungle
   Chapter 6: The White House
   Chapter 10: Money for Playing Games
   Chapter 12: Little Forrest

Activities while reading the book

CHAPTERS 1-4

Chapter 1
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) How is Forrest Gump different from other boys?
   (b) What happened to his father?
   (c) How many schools does Forrest go to?
   (d) In what way is Jenny Curran special?
   (e) Why is Forrest allowed into high school and university?
   (f) In what way is Forrest specially good at football?
   (g) Why does Forrest have to leave town?

2. Work in pairs.
   Student A: You are Forrest’s mother. Talk about Forrest and his problems. Talk about your hopes and fears for him.
   Student B: You are a good friend of Forrest’s mother. Listen to her and ask questions. Try to help her.

Chapter 2
1. Answer these questions.
   Who are these people? What do you know about them?
   (a) Jenny Curran   (b) Curtis   (c) Bubba

2. Write a letter from Forrest to his mother. In the letter, tell her about your life at university.

3. Talk with another student:
   What do you think Forrest means when he says: ‘I may be an idiot, but I’m not stupid!’
   Do you agree with him? Say why/why not.

Chapter 3
1. Work in pairs.
   Student A: You are Coach Bryant. You meet Jenny for the first time. You discover that you both know Forrest. Tell her why you like Forrest. Also, tell her about the ‘Big Game’ and how Forrest played. Tell Jenny why you are sad about Forrest.
   Student B: You are Jenny. This is the first time you have met Coach Bryant. Tell him why you like Forrest. Tell him that Forrest is playing in your group and that he plays the harmonica wonderfully.

2. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why is Forrest’s mother crying when Forrest gets home?
   (b) What do you think will happen in the next chapter?

Chapter 4
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why do people scream, ‘You’re an idiot!’ at Forrest?
   (b) What happens in the ‘showers’ in Vietnam?
   (c) Who does Forrest meet in the jungle?
   (d) What happened to Jenny?

2. Write a letter from Bubba to a good friend in America. Describe the war and say how you met Forrest.

CHAPTERS 5-8

Chapter 5
1. Answer these questions.
   (a) Why is Forrest an unusually brave man?
   (b) Why does Forrest play Bubba a song on the harmonica?
   (c) Why does Forrest feel that he ‘just wanted to die’?
   (d) Why does Forrest go to Danang?

2. Work in groups. Write down all the words about war that you can think of. Get help from other groups. Then write a story about war using seven of these words.

Chapter 6
1. In small groups, students complete the following sentences:
(a) Forrest watches Mr Chi at work because ...................................
(b) Forrest meets the American President because .................................
(c) Forrest runs all round the airport because ......................................
(d) The pretty girl calls Forrest ‘an ape’ because ...................................
(e) The president asks Forrest to have breakfast with him because ..........
(f) Forrest is in the newspapers because ...........................................

2 Work in groups. In this chapter, we read about people who are against the Vietnam War. What are your opinions about wars? Do you think that there are times when a country must go to war? Or do you think that war is always a bad thing?

Chapter 7
Answer these questions.
(a) Why does Forrest meet Jenny again?
(b) Describe the type of person that Jenny knows.
(c) Do you like this type of person? Say why/why not.
(d) Do you think Jenny is happy? Say why/why not.
(e) Who do you think is happier, Forrest or Jenny? Give reasons for your opinion.
(f) How does Jenny feel about the Vietnam War?
(g) How does Jenny's and Forrest's relationship change? What do you think will happen as a result?

Chapter 8
Are these sentences right or wrong? If they are wrong, correct them.
(a) Jenny left Forrest because she thought he was interested in another girl.
(b) Jenny spent two nights in prison because she shouted and threw things at the police.
(c) Forrest threw away his medal because Jenny asked him to.
(d) They put Forrest in prison because he was with Jenny.
(e) Forrest didn’t stay in prison for long because they realized he was a good man.
(f) Forrest went up into space with an ape and another man.

2 Work in pairs.
Student A: You are Jenny. Imagine that you don’t write a letter to Forrest. You tell him that you are leaving him.
Student B: You are Forrest. Imagine that Jenny doesn’t write you a letter but tells you that she is leaving you. What do you say?

Chapter 10
(a) Forrest played in a big chess tournament. How did this happen? Write the story.
(b) Forrest acted in a film with Raquel Welch. How did this happen? Write the story.

Chapter 11
1 What is the importance of these places in the story?
(a) Mobile (b) Bayou la Batre (c) Carolina (d) Savannah

2 Answer these questions.
A lot of people say that they married an idiot, but they don’t know what it’s like to marry a real one.
(a) Why does Forrest say this?
(b) Why does he cry that night?
(c) What does he decide as a result?
(d) How much money has he made a year later?
(e) Why does he decide to stop working?
(f) What do you think will happen in Savannah?

Chapter 12
1 Write down four new facts that you have learnt about Jenny and her life.
2 Discuss/write about these questions.
(a) Forrest gives all his money away. Who does he give his money to? Do you think he is right to do this?
(b) Do you think Forrest is right not to try to get Jenny back?

Activities after reading the book
1 Find the word coincidence in your dictionary. There are a lot of coincidences in Forrest Gump. For example, Forrest goes to Savannah for a holiday and by coincidence meets Jenny there - he does not know she lives there. Write down all the coincidences that you can think of in the story. Compare with other students.
2 What do you think the author is trying to do or say in this book? Talk with another student or write your answer.