THE PALE KING, by David Foster Wallace  
Reading group questions

1. Why do you think that most of the people in The Pale King who enter the Internal Revenue Service had troubled childhoods? Why are they drawn to the IRS and the work it entails?

2. On page 127, IRS workers are described as heroes, “The kind that seemed even more heroic because nobody applauded or even thought about them, or if they did it was usually as some enemy…The quiet kind who cleans up and does the dirty job.” Do you agree with this definition of heroism? Why or why not?

3. Before he decides to become an accountant like his father, Chris Fogle says, “Like many men of his generation, [my father] may well have been one of those people who can just proceed on autopilot. His attitude toward life was that there are certain things that have to be done and you simply have to do them—such as, for instance, going to work every day.” How does this passage relate to the narrator’s decision to become a CPA? Do you think previous generations had a different attitude toward work and commitment than we do today? In what ways?

4. Do you think that The Pale King addresses contemporary culture even though it is set in the 1980s? How so? What themes were the most relevant to you? Why?

5. In The Pale King, the unique stories of individual employees are the core of the novel, and it is through them that we learn about the bureaucratic machine of the IRS. Why do you think the author chose to write about multiple characters rather than to follow just one worker? How does each one react to the job’s tedium? Have you ever felt as if you were merely a small piece of a larger organization? Did you do anything to declare your individuality? Do the characters?

6. In §19, about civics, and throughout the rest of the book, the role of individual choice and of regulations and rules is debated. Do you think that individuals have a moral responsibility to the group? In your opinion, what should be the role of government? Are there differences between an individual’s responsibility and that of a larger organization? What are they?

7. David Foster Wallace extensively researched accounting and US tax law while writing The Pale King. Have your feelings about paying yearly taxes changed after reading the novel? Do you feel differently about IRS agents and the job they perform? Why or why not?
8. One character says, “One thing you learn in Rote Exams is how disorganized and inattentive most people are and how little they pay attention to what’s going on outside of their sphere” (158). What does this say about human nature? Do you agree or disagree? How do you think this relates to your own life?

9. Instances of boredom, tedium, and repetition occur throughout the novel, and on page 438, the narrator says, “[To be unborable] is the key to modern life. If you are immune to boredom, there is literally nothing you cannot accomplish.” What do you think this means? Is it fair to say, as John Berryman does, “Life, friends, is boring”? Is boredom an essential quality of life? Is navigating boredom essential for love, joy, meaning, success? Why or why not?

10. Discuss this passage: “What renders a truth meaningful, worthwhile, & c. is its relevance, which in turn requires extraordinary discernment and sensitivity to context, questions of value, and overall point—otherwise we might as well all just be computers downloading raw data to one another” (259). In light of this, how do you interpret Shane Drinion and Meredith Rand’s conversation in §46 and Sylvanshine’s Fact Psychic abilities? What do you think this says about communication and our interaction with others?

11. Several characters are intensely focused on themselves, and Chris Fogle says about his argument with his roommate’s Christian girlfriend in §22, “I was only pretending to ask her a question — I was actually giving the girlfriend a condescending little lecture on people’s narcissism and illusion of uniqueness, like the fat industrialist in Dickens or *Ragged Dick* who leans back from a giant dinner with his fingers laced over his huge stomach and cannot imagine how anyone in that moment could be hungry anywhere in the whole world” (213). What are other examples of narcissism in the book? Do you think they are related to ideas about responsibility, boredom, and happiness? Why and in what ways?

12. In the same chapter, Chris Fogle likens his discovery of accounting to his roommate’s Christian girlfriend’s religious experience, and says on page 214, “Enormous, sudden, dramatic, unexpected, life-changing experiences are not translatable or explainable to anyone else.” Do you agree? Have you ever tried to describe a transformative experience to someone else? Do you think it’s possible?

13. Discuss the different ways that the characters in *The Pale King* search for, and perhaps find, happiness.