

Discussion Guide for The Waters by Bonnie Jo Campbell

1. The novel is set in the Great Massasauga Swamp, specifically on an island known as "The Waters." How does the swamp serve as a metaphor or symbol in the story? How does the author use the setting to create a unique atmosphere for the narrative?
2. Discuss the complex relationships within the Zook family. How does Herself's character impact her three daughters, especially Rose Thorne and her daughter, Donkey? How do family secrets and dynamics shape the characters' lives?
3. How do the female characters navigate their roles in the community and within their families? In what ways does the author challenge traditional gender roles through the characters of Herself, Rose Thorne, and Donkey?
4. Explore the symbolic significance of the drawbridge that connects the island to the mainland. How does this drawbridge represent the divide between the Zook family and the rest of the community? How does it function as a metaphor for barriers and connections?
5. The novel celebrates the resilience of nature in the face of pollution and challenges. Discuss the impact of environmental issues on the characters and the community. How does nature play a role in the characters' lives, and what does it symbolize throughout the narrative?
6. Analyze the influence of Herself on her daughters, especially Rose Thorne and Donkey. How does Herself's unconventional approach to life and healing affect the choices and perspectives of the next generation? How does the absence of a traditional father figure impact the characters?
7. The townspeople both depend on Herself's cures and fear her "witchy" ways. Explore the dynamics between the Zook family and the rest of the community. How does the community's perception of Herself and her family contribute to the tension in the story?
8. Discuss how the elements of mysticism and magical realism enhance the narrative. How do they contribute to the overall tone of the story, and do they add depth to the characters and their experiences?

9. What do you think about Donkey's attachment to animals and the presence of detailed, sometimes disturbing instances of animal cruelty. Discuss the role of animals in the story and how they reflect the characters' emotions and relationships.
10. Consider the characters' arcs throughout the novel. How do they evolve or remain static? Are there pivotal moments that shape their growth, and do you find the resolutions satisfying?
11. The Waters has been described as reading like a dark fairy tale and a suspense thriller. How does the narrative structure contribute to the overall storytelling? Are there specific elements that enhance the suspense, and how do they impact your engagement with the plot?
12. The book has been compared to "Where the Crawdads Sing." If you've read both, discuss the similarities and differences. How does "The Waters" stand out on its own, and what unique themes or storytelling elements does it bring to the table?