



Back Roads by Tawni O'Dell

Announced on March 28, 2000

Discussion Questions

1. Harley Altmyer is a complicated figure. He is part saint, part sinner; part child, part man. Discuss these contradictions. Which parts of him do you like? Which do you dislike?
2. The author, Tawni O'Dell, a thirty-six year old woman has chosen Harley, a 19-year-old boy as the narrator and protagonist for *Back Roads*. What makes Harley so convincing to the reader? How might the emotional and psychological preoccupations of the novel have changed if Amber had told the story? Or Callie?
3. Early on Harley explains how his life is "lousy with women. All ages, shapes, sizes, and levels of purity." Despite his frustration and confusion, in what ways does Harley seem to understand and empathize with the women in his life? And in what ways does he fail to see what they want or need? What does it mean for him that he has no male role model?
4. *Back Roads* is very much a book about the emotional legacies passed from one generation of a family to the next. In what ways do Amber and Harley mimic the behavior of their mother and father? And, in the end, do you feel that they will be able to break free of that dubious legacy?
5. Harley's father is as complicated a figure as Harley. In many ways, he is painted as a decent, hardworking, loving man. Does his violence negate all that? And how culpable is Harley's mother for overlooking the beatings?
6. Early in the novel, Harley notes that "...the difference between Dad and me was he always went ahead and hit one of us; and he was a much happier person." Harley can barely contain his own violent impulses. What do his violent fantasies imply about him as a young man, as an abused child, as a brother?
7. Even though Harley's predicament could not be worse, he often manages to make you laugh. How does humor work in *Back Roads*?
8. Discuss the theme of character as it applies to Misty. Do you think she is beyond redemption? Should Harley's mother have assumed her new role as head of the family and sought help for Misty?
9. In what ways does six-year old Jody learn to adapt and cope without parents? What do you imagine her future holds once her brother and sisters are gone? Will it be better or worse without them?
10. As confused and hurting teenagers—Harley, a young man at his sexual peek, and Amber a lost, deeply troubled and promiscuous girl—sex plays a significant and complicated role in their relationship. What voids does the physical act of sex fill for each of them?
11. What does Callie's willingness to become sexually involved with Harley say about her as a person? As a mother? What does the relationship reveal about where she is in her own life?
12. The relationship between Amber and Harley is at the heart of the complete breakdown of the family, and results in Callie's death. Yet, as Betty explains to Harley, what happens between them is neither his fault nor hers. Do you agree with Betty? Why or why not? Who, if anyone, is responsible for these tragedies?