



We Were the Mulvaney's

by Joyce Carol Oates

Announced January 24, 2001

Discussion Questions

1. After the rape, Marianne keeps repeating, "I am as much to blame as he is." Does the narrative back this assertion up in any way? How much does Oates really reveal about what happened that night?
2. Both parents reject their daughter after the rape. Why? How are their reasons different? Are we meant to condemn both of them for their cruelty to Marianne? Or is their action somehow understandable and forgivable?
3. What role does the farm play in the life of the family? Is Oates making some larger life about the tragedies of the family farm in American society?
4. Why is it Patrick—the scientist, the cold rationalist—who acts to "execute justice" on Marianne's rapist?
5. Animals are at the heart of the Mulvaney family—they not only love their cats, dogs, birds, and horses, they love each other and communicate with each other *through* their animals. Is this a family strength, or does it reveal something skewed in the family emotional dynamic? Have they in a sense glorified their animals by playing up their "cuddly" loving qualities and overlooking their darker instincts? Does their connection with the animals change after Marianne is raped?
6. Darwin and the theory of evolution are discussed at several points in the novel. What point is Oates trying to make with this? How does Darwinian evolution relate to the central incident of the book?
7. Marianne is a Christian and Patrick a rationalist—yet theirs is the bond that remains the most intact after the rape. Are their worldviews more closely related than either of them believes? Or does the rape and its consequences somehow reconcile them not only emotionally but intellectually and spiritually as well?
8. If Marianne's rape happened today instead of the mid-1970's, would the impact on the family and on her life have been different? What if the Mulvaney's lived in a big city instead of in a small town – would the rape have had a different "meaning"?
9. Does the novel's ending in a joyous family reunion come as a shock after so much misery and heartbreak? Is this meant to be a lasting redemption?
10. Does Oates encourage a traditional good-and-evil reading of her novel? Or does she lead us to reexamine these very categories?