

Discussion Questions

***WATERS* - 9780393248432**

1. The prologue of *The Waters* begins, “Once upon a time.” How does this opening phrase prepare you for what is to come in the novel? Which aspects of the novel seem most strongly influenced by fairy tales and fantasy stories, and how successfully does author Bonnie Jo Campbell juxtapose these details with the realistic details in the novel?
2. What effect does the title of the prologue, “Chapter Zero,” create as you begin the novel? What purpose do you think this title serves? How does this first chapter title resonate when you reach the last chapter, the epilogue, “Chapter ∞”?
3. Hermine Zook has a particular worldview and a specific vocabulary to describe it. She calls the world outside M’sauga Island “Nowhere,” the people who live there “Brutes,” the girls who hounded Baba Rose for abortifacients “devil-girls,” and the healers who rely on Western medicine “devil-doctors.” In what ways do Hermine’s evaluations of the outside world seem justified, and in what ways do they seem mistaken?
4. Hermine’s three daughters are introduced as “accomplished,” “practical,” and “lazy and beautiful” (p. 1). What expectations do you have of Primrose, Maryrose (Molly), and Rose Thorn based on these descriptions? How are these expectations met and confounded as the story unfolds? What price does Primrose pay for her accomplishments, Molly for her practicality, and Rose Thorn for her laziness and beauty? Is there evidence that the women are hiding behind or are trapped by these characterizations?
5. *The Waters* differs from many contemporary novels in that its narrator is omniscient and thus can dip into the consciousness of any (or all) of the residents of Whiteheart, revealing their actions, thoughts, beliefs, and emotions, as well as their history. Why might Campbell have chosen to share the experiences of this particular community and these particular characters? In what ways does the omniscient point of view serve the themes of this story? Which perspectives do you most look forward to visiting in the story? What might you miss if the point of view was limited to one character’s perspective?

6. The complicated love story between Rose Thorn Zook and Titus Clay Jr. is a major plot strand in *The Waters*. What attracts Rosie and Titus to each other? In what ways is each of them at fault for the cycles of trouble between them? Do you think one of them is more at fault than the other in any given cycle? Are you surprised by the outcome of their relationship?

7. Beginning in chapter four, eleven-year-old Dorothy “Donkey” Zook becomes a main focus of the omniscient narrator. What information and insights does Donkey bring to the novel that cannot be provided by the other characters? In what ways does Donkey’s preoccupation with math (and the truth) serve her, and in what ways does it hinder her? How does Donkey’s relationship with Hermine compare to Donkey’s relationships with Rose Thorn, Molly, and Prim? How are these relationships influenced by Donkey’s position in the family as the youngest girl?

8. In chapter four, we learn that Donkey hears gunshots every day, “from the gun club to the east and from the river to the north and occasionally from Lovers Road. Last summer, she’d returned from gathering sassafras bark and wild grapes at the top of the island and found six holes in the porch screen—three on the east side and three on the west—where the bullets must have passed through” (p. 62). Does Donkey’s desensitization to gunshots and bullets fully explain why she is more curious than alarmed when she notices Jamie Standish dressed in camouflage and pointing a gun toward M’sauga Island? Are you as surprised as Donkey is to discover that Hermine has been shot?

9. What cultural forces have shaped Jamie Standish’s views about the world, and how do his views lead him to shoot Hermine Zook? Why do you think he feels so much remorse for this act? How does his remorse affect his life as the novel progresses?

10. When Hermine returns from the hospital after having her hand amputated, she is a changed woman. What do these changes in Hermine’s personality mean for Donkey’s own personality and her day-to-day life as a child on the island? Are there any ways in which the changes in Hermine benefit Donkey? Consider Donkey’s realization later in the story, that “she had become the biggest of the nested dolls, the doll that contained the other dolls,

and now what she did would determine the future for her mother and sister and grandmother, all of whom, in this moment, she carried inside her” (p. 350).

11. In what ways do the characters in *The Waters* conform to “traditional” male and female roles, and in what ways do they confound them? Consider two scenes in particular:

a) The scene in chapter six during which Titus Clay Jr., Jamie Standish, Tony Martin, and Rick Dickmon whitewash the walls of the church at the direction of Reverend Roy.

b) The scene that spans chapters thirteen and fourteen, during which Donkey and her family have dinner together at Rose Cottage.

What do these scenes say about traditional notions of masculinity and femininity? What comments does Campbell seem to be making about gender stereotypes?

12. *The Waters* is rich with allusions to and observations about fertility, beginning with the images of farmers’ fields and the Babby Basket hanging under the Boneset Table. The farmers in Whiteheart worry about the fertility of their fields, and Hermine worries that, without her stewardship, M’sauga Island will be overrun by snakes and poisonous plants (and men). Hermine aborts Aster’s foal, and Donkey provides a false concoction in response to Rose Thorn’s cuntshell. Delilah the cow dies while calving, and Donkey, watching from behind the moon palace, fears that her mother will also die giving birth to Rose Moon. Who wants to control fertility in the world of *The Waters*, and why? What are the implications of unmitigated fertility? What conclusions does the novel suggest based on its exploration of human fertility? Do you agree with these conclusions?

13. The men of Whiteheart often fret that Hermine Zook will put a curse on them, but Herself only formulates two curses in *The Waters*, the first against her husband, Wild Will, “that he should live as a woman, that he should know what it was to be a woman” and the second against the rapist Titus Clay Sr., that he “should never lay eyes on beautiful Rose Thorn again” (p. 46). What do these curses illustrate about Hermine’s nature, and how do they play out in the novel? What position does the novel take regarding Hermine’s power to influence the natural world and its creatures, including people?

14. Donkey knows that her notebook, *True Things*, is “the center of her education” (p. 58). While she longs to attend the public school in Nowhere, she also feels obligated to stay on

the island and care for her granny. The adults in Donkey's life have their own opinions about her formal education. Molly, for example, insists that Donkey weave potholders "as part of her *art education*" (p. 131). What constitutes a good education according to Molly, Prim, Rose Thorn, and Hermine? How do their ideas differ from one another's—and from Donkey's? Does the novel take a position regarding other-directed education and self-directed education?

15. In chapter fifteen, what leads Whitey Whitby, Ralph and Larry Darling, and Two-Inch Tony to cut down the big willow tree near the Boneset Table? What does this act symbolize in the story? What is the effect of the act on Donkey and Hermine? How did you react to this event as it happened?

16. As a result of Titus's reconciliation with Lorena at the end of chapter fifteen, how does the dynamic change between Titus and Donkey, between Titus and the residents of Whiteheart, and between Titus and Rose Thorn? Why do the men of Whiteheart no longer see Titus as the hero among them after he marries Lorena? What is it about Titus's choice that the residents of Whiteheart see as a betrayal?

17. At the beginning of chapter eighteen, six men gather at Boneset in the middle of the night, an echo of the scene in chapter one when the same men gather outside the Muck Rattler after church. Has your opinion of these men changed between that first gathering, when Rose Thorn approaches them with a baby hidden in her backpack, and the later one, when Rose Thorn approaches in labor with her second child? Does the narrator's characterization of the men at the beginning of chapter eighteen as "a perfect number of men" (p. 312) affect your view of them? Do their actions in this chapter redeem them in your eyes?

18. Animals are a rich source of symbolism in *The Waters*. Discuss the literal and figurative role of donkeys, chickens, cows, crayfish, and/or crows. How does Donkey's view of animals and their place in the world differ from Hermine's, and how do their different views lead to trouble between them? What is the role of the massasauga rattlesnake and its blood in the history of Whiteheart? Why does Donkey identify so strongly with the snake she calls the Lindworm?

19. The climax of the novel occurs in chapter nineteen, when Donkey is bitten by the Lindworm, saving Titus from being bitten himself. How effective is the language Campbell uses during this scene to communicate both the visceral experience of the snakebite and its aftermath, and the symbolism of the event? Why do you think the narrator shifts briefly into Titus's point of view just after Donkey has been bitten?

20. Why might Campbell have chosen to end the novel with a scene of Titus alone outside Boneset and on M'sauga Island? What are Titus's intentions as he approaches the island that morning, and how and why do his intentions change once he arrives? How does your opinion of Titus change between the beginning of the novel and this final scene? What do you imagine will happen between Titus and Rose Thorn and between Titus and Donkey in the future, after the novel has ended?