



Freshman Year Reading/ Common Reading Guide

Educated

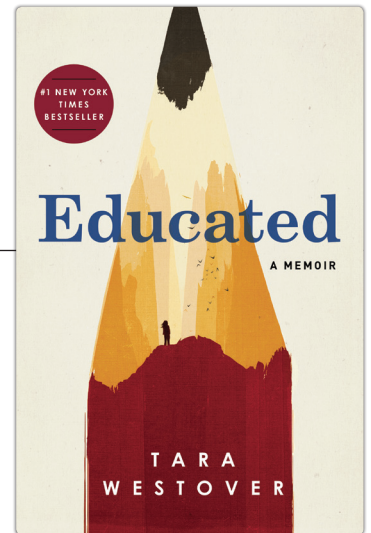
A Memoir

by Tara Westover

**Selected for
Common Reading at:**

Drake University Center
for the Humanities
Lakeland University
Lone Star College – University Park
Malone University
St. Bonaventure University
The Taft School
University of Idaho
University of Texas at Tyler

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discussion questions

1. In the book's Prologue, what does the author say is "the fact more than any other that makes [her] family different" (xiv) from other families? Why do Westover's parents make this choice that sets them apart from most others? How does Westover come to see their choice from a different perspective once she begins her formal education?
2. What does Westover's family try to impart about the way they believe a woman ought—or ought not—to be and how do they convey this? How does the author meet or fail to meet these expectations as a young woman herself and how does this influence and shape her sense of self? In what ways does the author challenge her parents' notions of what a woman should be and how is this received? What makes Westover worry that she is "the wrong sort of woman" and what impact does this have on her early relationships, both romantic and platonic?
3. In Chapter 12, what moment does the author say "defines [her] memory" (111) of the night when her brother Shawn committed violence against her? What did Westover tell herself in the midst of the violence about herself? What does she say she later realized was a major effect of this violence against her?
4. When Westover's brother Tyler asks her if she is studying for the ACT, she says that she already "knew how her life would play out" (123). What did the author believe her future would be like at that point in time? What changes her mind?
5. Consider how the book creates an intricate dialogue about healing. How do Westover's parents view mainstream medicine and how does this affect their lives and the lives of their children? How does Westover's own view of traditional

medicine evolve throughout the story and how does this correspond with what she shares about her own health? How does the memoir also address other kinds of healing—i.e. emotional and spiritual healing? For example, what does the book offer about the ways in which we heal or the frailty or resilience of body, mind, and spirit?

6. In Chapter 20, the author reveals that her brother Shawn often used a racial epithet to tease her. What was Westover's response when her brother first began using the epithet? How does her response to this change later in life and what leads to this change? What might this suggest about racism and the ways in which racism can be countered?
7. After describing one of the instances of physical violence perpetrated against her by her brother Shawn, Westover tells readers that what was most important to her was "[her] ability to lie to [herself] convincingly" (189). Where else do we see evidence of this in the story? What does Westover lie to herself about and why? Is she ever able to break this pattern and tell herself the truth? If so, what allows her to do this and what truths does she allow herself to tell?
8. When the author rewrites an entry in her journal about her brother's violence against her in order to tell the truth of what happened without assigning herself blame, she says that it made her realize something about her own life. What did she realize via the retelling or re-write of this memory and why was this such a pivotal shift for her?
9. Explore the theme of faith. What impact did the author's parents' religious beliefs have on the Westover family? Was their spirituality a positive force? Discuss. What challenges of faith does the author confront as she moves into her future? How does her schooling help her to confront these issues from a new perspective? Besides religious faith, consider how else the book sets up a dialogue about faith. In what does the author seem to find faith? Does this faith help her or hinder her? Explain.
10. How does Westover come to learn about her father's presumed mental illness? Does this knowledge affect the way that she sees her father or alter her relationship with him? Why or why not? How does her mother react to her assertions about her father's mental health? How does the author's own relationship with mental health and mental health care evolve throughout the course of the book and what causes this evolution?
11. What did Westover say that she intended to study in college and how did her actual program of study compare to this? What "caused a kind of crisis in her" (228) and what does she mean by this? What steps does she take to mitigate this crisis?
12. At Cambridge University, the author becomes interested in historiography. What is historiography and why do you think this particular subject was so appealing to Westover? As she considers this subject, what question does she become preoccupied with? How does her answer to this question evolve over time and what causes this change?
13. Westover's Cambridge professors indicate that her time at university reminds them of George Bernard Shaw's 20th century play *Pygmalion*. What similarities might they have been observing between Westover and Shaw's Eliza Doolittle? What lesson do they hope that Westover will take to heart after learning of this comparison? Does she?
14. In Chapter 30, the author describes learning about Isaiah Berlin's positive liberty and negative liberty during a lecture at Cambridge University. She notes that she didn't understand the meaning of positive liberty or what it meant to "self-coerce" (256). Why do you think Westover did not understand these concepts at the time?

15. What does the author say provided her with “a vocabulary for the uneasiness [she]’d felt since childhood” (259)? How does it help her to rearrange her view of what is possible for her? When this “vocabulary” leads her to the writings of John Stuart Mill, why does Westover find such comfort in his sentence: “It is a subject on which nothing final can be known” (259)?
16. In Chapter 36, while studying at Harvard University, the author “became obsessed with . . . how a person ought to weigh their special obligations to kin against their obligations to society as a whole” (297). How does Westover seem to reconcile this within her own life and what challenges does this present? Does her memoir ultimately seem to answer this question of whether the two can, in fact, be reconciled and, if so, how?
17. After Westover tells her father that Shawn has threatened to kill their sister Audrey, why do you think that Westover begins to doubt her own memories of this event—as well as her sanity? What impact does this have on her life and schooling? How is she able to come to terms with this and what helps her in her recovery?
18. While the author is visiting the Middle East with her friend Drew, what worry does she begin to have about herself and her journey and education? How does she cope with this? How does her homecoming after this time differ from her previous visits at the family home in Idaho? Why do you think returning home was so important to her? What fears does Westover have about returning and are these fears ever alleviated? If so, how? How does her family respond to her upon her return?
19. At the end of the book, what does the author say she believes has ultimately come between her and her father? What role did her education play in this? What moment does Westover believe caused a breach between her and her father “too vast to be bridged” (328)? How does Westover say she comes to shed her guilt about the life choices she has made?
20. At various points in the book, as well as in the final Note on the Text, the author explains that her memories often differ from those of her family members, with each having different accounts of pivotal moments in their lives. What does the book reveal about the nature of memory and about memory and trauma? Alternatively, what might it reveal about memory and healing?
21. What does education mean to the author? Why do you think that Westover chose to write a memoir that centers around the theme of her education? How might her life have been different if she had chosen not to leave home and attend college? What risks did she face and what fears did the author have to overcome in order to leave home and pursue her higher education? How did Westover change as a result of her formalized education? In what ways was her education transformative and what did she gain as a result?

— about the guide’s writer

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