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First-Year and Common Reading Guide

Educated

A Memoir

by Tara Westover

Random House Trade Paperbacks

Paperback | 978-0-399-59052-8 | 368 pages | \$18.99

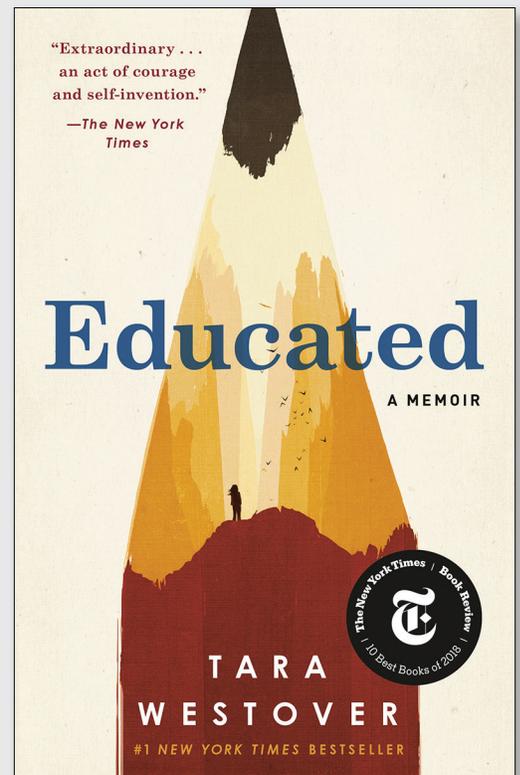
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ABOUT THE BOOK

Born to survivalists in the mountains of Idaho, Tara Westover was 17 the first time she set foot in a classroom. Her family was so isolated from mainstream society that there was no one to ensure the children received an education, and no one to intervene when one of Tara's older brothers became violent. When another brother got himself into college, Tara decided to try a new kind of life. Her quest for knowledge transformed her, taking her over oceans and across continents, to Harvard and to Cambridge University. Only then would she wonder if she'd traveled too far, if there was still a way home.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Westover was born in Idaho in 1986. She received her BA from Brigham Young University in 2008 and was subsequently awarded a Gates Cambridge Scholarship. She earned an MPhil from Trinity College, Cambridge, in 2009, and in 2010 was a visiting fellow at Harvard University. She returned to Cambridge, where she was awarded a PhD in history in 2014. *Educated* is her first book.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. The author's father subscribes to many unusual theories and beliefs. Why is it that these beliefs do not seem strange to her or her siblings?
2. Faith is a persistent theme in this story. The author's father practices a radical strain of Mormonism, and throughout the story she struggles to redefine her faith in a way that respects her heritage while also satisfying her own moral beliefs. Why is it so difficult for her (and for others) to hold religious beliefs that are different from those of their family members?
3. "It's strange how you give the people you love so much power over you, I had written in my journal," Westover writes. "But Shawn had more power over me than I could possibly have imagined. He had defined me to myself, and there's no greater power than that." How does the author's relationship with Shawn evolve? Why is she so drawn to him when he first moves back home? When does she begin to understand that, even though she loves him, she needs to protect herself from him?
4. After an episode in which her older brother is violent with her, Westover writes about her denial of what had happened, saying what was most important to her was her "ability to lie to [herself] convincingly." Later in the book, after her brother has threatened to kill her sister Audrey, she begins to doubt her own memories of the event, as well as her own sanity. Why is it so difficult for the author to accept the reality of her experiences?
5. How does a love of music shape the Westover's life?
6. The author spends her first months at college working several jobs, trying to scrape together enough money for food and rent. Why does not having enough money make it hard for her to focus on her education? What does she mean when she says that the most powerful advantage of money is "the ability to think of things besides money"?
7. "The word and the way Shawn said it hadn't changed; only my ears were different," Westover writes. She had never heard of the civil rights movement until she went to college. How does learning about it change her understanding of the role of race in American history? How does it change her behavior?
8. "I believed myself invincible," Westover writes. She says that asking for help was crucial to healing after her brother's attacks but, at the same time, asking for help was nearly impossible for her to do. Why is it that when people most need help they find it hard to ask? Why is it that when we are struggling we often isolate ourselves?
9. The author felt uncomfortable at Cambridge because she had grown up poor and most of the other students had not. To help her, a professor tells her the story of Pygmalion, saying, "She was just a cockney in a nice dress. Until she believed in herself. Then it didn't matter what dress she wore." What does the professor want Westover to understand about who belongs at that university and why?
10. What's the difference between an education that you choose for yourself and one someone chooses for you?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

(CONTINUED)

11. At Cambridge, Westover attends a lecture about Isaiah Berlin's concepts of negative and positive liberty. Why is this lecture so significant to her? What does it teach her about the ways in which we constrain ourselves?
12. The author writes about her first exposure to feminism in the form of the writings of John Stuart Mill. What was her relationship to feminism like before she read Mill? Why does she find such comfort in this sentence: "[The nature of woman] is a subject on which nothing final can be known?"
13. 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)?
14. The author writes about the conflict that can arise between loyalty to yourself and loyalty to others. Of her own decision to become estranged from her father, she has said, "You can love someone and still choose to say goodbye to them. You can miss someone every day, and still be grateful they are no longer a part of your life." What does it mean to forgive someone but to choose a path that leads away from them?
15. The author has chosen to include several footnotes, and also a note at the end, describing versions of events that differ from her own memory. Why does she include these perspectives? What does it mean to you as a reader to have these alternative narratives?
16. What does education mean to the author, and why has she chosen to title the book *Educated*?

ABOUT THIS GUIDE'S WRITERS

This guide includes questions adapted from educator guides written by Je Banach and Dr. Kimberly N. Parker.

Je Banach is a senior member of the Resident Faculty in Fiction at the Yale Writers' Workshop. She has written for PEN, *Vogue*, *ELLE*, *Esquire*, *Granta*, *The Paris Review*, *Electric Literature*, and other venues and was a long-time contributor to Harold Bloom's literary series. She is the author of more than 60 literary guides including guides to works by Maya Angelou, Salman Rushdie, His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Haruki Murakami, and many others.

Dr. Kimberly N. Parker — educator, literacy consultant, and Boston-based writer — holds a steadfast belief in the power of literacy to normalize the high achievement of all students, especially Black, Latinx, and other children of color. She is currently the Director of the Crimson Summer Academy at Harvard University, and is the author of the forthcoming book, *Literacy is Liberation: Working Toward Justice Through Culturally Relevant Teaching* (ASCD, 2022), documenting her successful literacy work based on her classroom and professional development experiences. Kim is the 2020 recipient of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Outstanding Elementary Educator Award; a co-founder of #DisruptTexts and #31DaysIBPOC; and the current president of the Black Educators' Alliance of MA (BEAM). Follow her on Twitter at: @TchKimpossible.

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Penguin Random House Education
1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

www.commonreads.com

Queries: commonreads@penguinrandomhouse.com

