

THE MOON TRILOGY

A Guide for Readers & Book Groups

Dear Reader,

When I first began writing *The Moonstoners*, set in the 1960s, I had no idea it would evolve into a trilogy. Once I began to research the decade, however, it became impossible for me to separate the '60s from a much larger subject: Love. I think the 1960s exemplified our best, lost dreams—from the righteous visions of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Promised Land" and Robert F. Kennedy's "Newer World", to the ceaseless protests of passionate youth to end war, racism, inequalities and injustices of all kinds, to the "all you need is love" flower-power children. The vibrant, explosive 1960s seemed the embodiment of philosopher Blaise Pascal's baffling quote: "When one does not love too much, one does not love enough". This quote became the framework for the three books of The Moon Trilogy, not to judge the hearts of the characters, but to examine them, up close and personal.

On the surface, *The Moonstoners* is a love story between a particular man and woman during a turbulent time in history, but underneath is an exploration of various forms of love: the bonds between parents and children, between siblings, between races, the love of self, the love of God. Sometimes we do the wrong things for love. In their own ways, each character loves too much. Sometimes loving too much can be as destructive as hatred. So what does loving *too much*, in the Pascalian sense, really mean?

The Last Moon Before Home examines the subject of caregiving, one of love's highest callings and toughest challenges. For many years, I was a counselor for caregivers of people with dementia, and I was continually awed by their countless, daily acts of love, courage, and sacrifice, and at the amazing ways they strengthened and transformed over the long process of giving demanding and vigilant care. "Greater love has no one than this"—to give compassionate care to another human being and to lay down your own life to do it. Care-giving and care-receiving both go against the grain; it forces us to reexamine what loving too much really means.

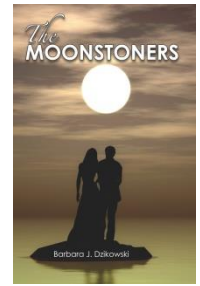
The Fireweed Moon, set in 2017, is a story about the pull of love and connection between generations during this confusing, polarized period of history that we are living through right now; a crossroads time. I wrote this book in the midst of the COVID pandemic—which was also in the midst of the horrific George Floyd murder. Following Floyd's murder, I was deeply inspired by the throngs of young people all across the nation who took to the streets in passionate protest, just like the 1960s. And the trilogy came full circle. Is loving too much the only thing that can bring us back together?

Each book is written from multiple viewpoints; for me it's a helpful way to examine human interactions and emotions, up close and personal. Each book is a refrain of certain metaphors and echoes similar themes—forgiveness; sacrifice; redemption; self-examination; the circular cycle of life; the lasting impact of our best, lost dreams; and the power of our choices, large and small, to make a difference for love... or not.

Theologian Henri Nouwen once wrote, "What is most personal is most universal". It is my hope that you will find something in these novels that speaks personally to you.

Barbara

Discussion Questions: THE MOONSTONERS (Book One)



1. The prologue states, “Moonstoners were the discontents, the dreamers, the seekers of a newer world. Moonstoners were the ones who were broken by love, yet still they loved too much.” Do you think the “moon” is an appropriate image to represent this trilogy? Why or why not?
2. In reference to Pascal’s quote, it could be said that each of these main characters loved “too much”, whether for the good or the bad: Noël, Leon, Ricky, Mary, Walt, Adam, Theckla, Stella, even Jack. Give some examples of how their styles of loving differed from one another. Did their love for others/self/God evolve in any way?
3. Leon and Ricky have a complicated relationship. Their father tells Ricky, “you manage to end up with your heart wide open, no matter what life throws at you. But Leon’s hiding from himself. Hiding from life.” Is this the way you would describe the brothers or did you see them another way? Were you hoping that Noël and Ricky would end up together? Do you think Leon was right or wrong to take up with Noël?
4. Do you think the 1960s and its events were accurately portrayed in this novel? In your estimation, did weaving the cultural references of that decade into the narrative enhance or detract from the main themes?
5. Which character affected you the most? Did you identify with the most? The least?
6. Despite her traumatic life, Theckla holds on to her belief that “there was something mightier than hatred that held us all together, something woven deeply into our souls. And it always had the last word.” Do you believe this is true? Why or why not?
7. Forgiveness is a big theme in this novel, as symbolized by the *oplatek* wafer. Give some examples of how the characters forgave one another. Do you think Adam was right to forgive his father?
8. Why do you think Noël felt “unlovable”? Yet, she experiences something profound during Christmas Eve mass. (“When her turn came to ingest the holy wafer, so similar to the *oplatek*, she was overcome by an unexpected swell of certainty, a visceral sense of belonging in the exact place where she stood. Everyone, as Walt had whispered, was part of the same body, no exceptions, no exclusions. That she was undeserving didn’t matter.”) Discuss your thoughts about her feelings of redemption at this moment. Have you ever had a similar experience?
9. What does this novel say about race relations and prejudice? Do you think any of the characters evolved beyond their prejudice?
10. How does the sacrifice made by Walt’s mother impact Noël and restore her belief in the valor of “loving too much”? How do you feel about Walt’s mother’s sacrifice to put him on the steamer for America without her?
11. Leon escapes into music, even though he has difficulty expressing his emotions. Is anyone in your life also this way? Discuss the significance of music in your own life.

THE MOONSTONER DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

12. Adam Trudeau is a tragic character, leading him to wonder, “How did this world get so broken? What does *fallen* really mean? Did it mean fallen from a high place, the way their mother had fallen and shattered like a tea cup? Could we ever get back to that high place? or must we be broken to return?” What are your thoughts on this?
13. How are Leon and Noël influenced by their parents’ trauma? What about Adam? Bo? Steve?
14. Compare and contrast Leon’s relationship with Stella and Noël. Which one do you think was most compatible with him and in what ways?
15. There are many metaphors in this novel. Bobby Kennedy’s tragic bid for the presidency mirrors the timing of events in Leon and Noël’s relationship and the PT-109 tie-clasp. Also, The Moonstone Inn, which is a turning point for both Leon and Noël. What do you think is the significance of these metaphors? How did Noël and Leon’s experience at the Moonstone Inn and its aftermath change them?
16. Why do you think the photographs Noël took at the Bobby Kennedy rally meant so much to her?
17. Did you like the way the novel ended? Why or why not?



Discussion Questions: THE LAST MOON BEFORE HOME

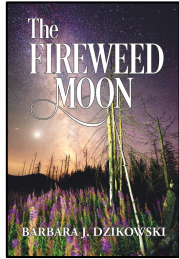
(Book Two)

1. The opening line states, “The suspension of time has a way of revealing the truth; the kind of truth that’s bigger than one person, one lifetime.” Do you think this is true?
2. Noël believes that “bringing Willow into being was the fulfillment of her destiny on earth.” Do you think she made the right decision to go ahead with Willow’s birth knowing it would take her own life? Does this have a parallel to Walt’s mother’s sacrifice to send Walt to America without her? Discuss.
3. Which character affected you the most? Did you identify with the most? The least?
4. Despite his Alzheimer’s diagnosis, Walt decides that he still has “plenty of stuff to figure out before he leaves this earth, and there is no way in hell he’s going to just clam up and fade into the sunset until he’s good and ready.” How do you think you would handle a dementia diagnosis for yourself or a loved one? Discuss how differently Ricky, Mary, and Leon handle Walt’s diagnosis.
5. Stella is very conflicted over her feelings for Gene Henke. (“Being alone with him always made her a little uncomfortable at first, mostly because she realized she was stoking his attention to fill up her own voids.”) Do you think her feelings for him are understandable? Relatable?
6. Willow feels as if she is invisible and that she fades “into every classroom, every landscape, including her own home, like a telephone pole ... tell it to Willow and it goes nowhere, like stuffing a note inside a bottle and sending it out to sea.” How does Willow’s feeling of invisibility affect her as the novel progresses?
7. Walt goes through various stages of decline in his dementia. Did his disease progression surprise you in any way or cause you to view Alzheimer’s differently? Explain.
8. Ricky describes the way Leon handles the news of Noël’s death as: “His face (was) hardening to stone, the same way Ma’s did when overwhelmed by emotions. That’s what the two of them did; they short-circuited like an old TV set—one puff of fire and smoke, then nothing at all.” Do you think this is an accurate description of how Leon and Mary handle trauma? Does it complicate, or make things easier for them? For those around them? Have you ever known someone who handles trauma in this way?
9. What are your thoughts about Gus Sultanski and his obsession with JFK’s assassination? Did you feel this subplot added to or detracted from the main storyline?

THE LAST MOON BEFORE HOME DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

10. What do you think this novel is saying, if anything, about true love versus marriage? What are your thoughts about this?
11. Noël's diary describes Leon as "a complicated man, very much a man whose actions speak louder than his words and often belie them. He may not say the right things but he always ends up doing them. He's carved with so many holes inside, yet when it's darkest, he shines through his brokenness like a Moroccan lantern." Do you think this is an accurate description of him? Do you feel he changed as the novel progressed? How do you characterize him? Did you like him or not?
12. Discuss the significance, if any, of these metaphors in the novel: the weeping willow trees; the fire ceremony; the Black Madonna of **Częstochowa**; the Ziemny's front porch; art and artists; the color yellow (the yellow boat in Ricky's last painting, Walt's mother's yellow tulips, Walt asking, "how come nothing's yellow anymore?"). How do you think they contribute to the overall theme?
13. Willow states, "wouldn't it be great if they invented a pill so that we just remembered the good things?" and Gus replies, "That'd be difficult to do, separate it out, I mean. Most every one of our memories comes wrapped in both good and bad." What are your thoughts about this?
14. Discuss how Mary's death bed conversations with Stella, Leon, and Willow affected you. Did they help you understand Mary better, and for the better or the worse? How did these conversations impact Stella, Leon, and Willow?
15. Did you like the way the novel ends? Why or why not?

Discussion Questions: THE FIREWEED MOON (Book Three)



1. Why do you think this novel was titled “The Fireweed Moon”? Do you think this is an appropriate title? Why or why not?
2. Willow muses that “our inner child can be our worst abuser.” Do you agree?
3. How do you think Leon has evolved from the previous two novels? In what ways is he the same?
4. Which character affected you the most? Did you identify with the most? The least?
5. Leon doesn’t offer to do the exhumation of Lily’s grave, Booker doesn’t ask for it, but Willow perceives the exhumation as “an opportunity to do something good, the next right thing.” Do you think it was right to pursue it? Why or why not?
6. With regard to Cory, Adam harbors “a thin hope that underneath all that tattoo ink, bigotry, and blubber, a glimmer of a good heart might yet be beating.” Some will perceive Cory as despicable. Others might see him as a victim. What are your thoughts about Cory?
7. A cast of secondary characters/viewpoints appears throughout the novel, including Christopher Green and his father Ben; Joshua Wharton and his grandfather Harley; Dolly Schmidt, and Uncle Steve. What is their significance? Do you think they enhance or detract from the overall meaning of the novel?
8. Willow views much of her own life and the lives of others through the lens of art. How do you think this affects her world view? What are your thoughts about art and artists and how they affect us?
9. Willow feels the connection to her deceased family, a thin line between this life and the next, including Aunt Clarissa’s presence in the attic bedroom. Have you ever had similar feelings?
10. What are your thoughts about Nick Hardy? Willow believes in his “underlying decency, his needle-straight moral compass, his bright, razor-sharp mind, his calling. Nick Hardy had a Maltese cross tattooed over his heart, the cross of defenders and firefighters.” What do you think is the attraction between them? What do you think keeps them apart? What do you think Willow learns about herself through her relationship with Nick?

THE FIREWEED MOON DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (continued)

11. Compare and contrast the two sermons in the novel. Do you think love is our saving power? Nick thinks we have to get back to the fundamental values that unite us in order to end our polarization from one another. Do you think love is the fundamental core of our nature? What values do you perceive as integral to our shared humanity?
12. How do you think Uncle Steve is influenced by Lily's trauma? How are Willow and Adam influenced by it?
13. Why do you think her traumatic discussion with Adam in his kitchen that night was "a letting-go moment" for Willow, "a turning point, a sobering into a deeper place that no longer hurt"? What does "unconditional love" mean to you?
14. Pastor Ray believes that going beyond our impulses to flee or fight leads to transcendence. What are your thoughts about this? Can you think of an example of how any of the characters went beyond their urge to flee or fight? Is there an example in your own life?
15. What are your thoughts about Lily? Did you see her as a victim or grown beyond that role? Did you have empathy for her situation or do you think she was to blame for it?
16. What do you think Noël's old Kodak photos say about the continuity of life between generations? How did rediscovering those photos help heal Adam?
17. Did you like the way this novel ended? Why or why not?