

Questions and Topics for Discussion

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/550168/educated-by-tara-westover/9780399590504/readers-guide/>

1. Many of Tara's father's choices have an obvious impact on Tara's life, but how did her mother's choices influence her? How did that change over time?
2. Tara's brother Tyler tells her to take the ACT. What motivates Tara to follow his advice?
3. Charles was Tara's first window into the outside world. Under his influence, Tara begins to dress differently and takes medicine for the first time. Discuss Tara's conflicting admiration for both Charles and her father.
4. Tara has titled her book *Educated* and much of her education takes place in classrooms, lectures, or other university environments. But not all. What other important moments of "education" were there? What friends, acquaintances, or experiences had the most impact on Tara? What does that imply about what an education is?
5. Eventually, Tara confronts her family about her brother's abuse. How do different the members of her family respond?
6. What keeps Tara coming back to her family as an adult?
7. Ultimately, what type of freedom did education give Tara?
8. Tara wrote this at the age of thirty, while in the midst of her healing process. Why do you think she chose to write it so young, and how does this distinguish the book from similar memoirs?
9. Tara paid a high price for her education: she lost her family. Do you think she would make the same choice again?





Photo courtesy of Paul Stuart

Tara Westover

Author of [EDUCATED](#)

Interviewed by Alex Layman on February 19, 2018

There is a property in rural Idaho where a junkyard of old cars and scrap metal sprawls beneath a pristine peak. Gas reservoirs lay buried around the grounds in preparation for the End of Days. Near the junkyard rests a home that undoubtedly smells of herbal tinctures being concocted inside, watched over by the mountain. Buck Peak is the childhood home of Tara Westover, a place where doctors, the U.S. government, and the ideas of non-Mormon “gentiles” are not welcome. In this rural cathedral, two unwritten rules reign supreme: God’s word above all; her father’s word above all else.

Educated, Westover’s startling debut memoir, is the story of her extreme Mormon upbringing, one that prevented her from participating in any form of schooling until she enrolled at BYU at age 17. By age 27, she’d complete her Ph.D at Cambridge University. While the educational thread pulls the story forward, the heart of this tale is about faith, violence, loss, and the cost of trying to find your voice in a family that operates in rigid extremes. “My life was narrated for me by others,” Westover writes. “Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs.”

It took years until Westover discovered her voice held its own weight, especially when pitted against that of her father or brother, Shawn. Both men expected the women in their life to heed to their commands, and Shawn physically tormented Westover for much of her youth, culminating in a brutal assault of her in a grocery store parking lot. Westover writes about this attack and similar incidents with

unflinching clarity, a trait that permeates throughout the book, leaving the reader both shocked and wholly engrossed in every familial twist or betrayal. She held Shawn's actions a secret for years, until Shawn began to treat his wife equally rough. When Westover could no longer keep quiet about these incidents, she approached her parents with the facts. The result was enough to fracture the family. Mother, sister, and father all disavowed her story. Shawn threatened her life when confronted with her version of the story; most of the family wrote his threats off as a joke. Her mother and father gave Westover a choice: retract her "lies" or be cast out. In other words: believe her own story, her own history, her own memory, or agree to theirs. So, she left.

"After all that happened, I was really angry with my parents and my whole family," Westover says. "I needed to be angry; I needed to get the hell out of there. The problem with that is, it invades your whole life," she continues. "So, in order to get to that place to leave my family, which was incredibly difficult, I had to be so angry with them that it filled up every layer of my life. I became someone who had no beautiful memories, whose whole childhood was violence and chaos."

Because of this eschewal of memories, Westover admits that writing about Shawn's violent episodes, her father's brutal burn accident that nearly killed him, or the betrayals from her mother and sister were not the difficult scenes to recount. "What was really hard to write about were the pleasant things, the lovely things," she says. "Picking herbs with my mother, playing in the junkyard, these are the things I loved from my childhood the most, and these were the things I lost. I think it was because I'd reckoned with the violence, I'd come to terms with it and understood it for what it was, and that it wasn't going to happen again. I hadn't reckoned with the loss of the good things."

By book's end, Westover's relationship with her family is more broken than ever. She admits that it would've been easier to write this book when she was older, when she had more time to process everything, and to allow for the possibility for familial reconciliation. But that's not her current reality, and writing a book that was true to who she is now, and what she's been through, was critical. "I wanted to capture that moment where you don't know how things are going to end, and it's actually quite messy, and it's not clear. We have a message that forgiveness is the right thing no matter what. I happen to believe that, but I worry we don't know what forgiveness looks like, and we think it looks like reconciliation. For some people, it doesn't, and it hasn't looked like that for me yet."

Alex Layman is a writer living in Boulder, Colorado.

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Source: <https://www.kirkusreviews.com/features/tara-westover/>

