



We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves Reader's Guide

BY KAREN JOY FOWLER

Category: Literary Fiction

READERS GUIDE

Questions and Topics for Discussion

INTRODUCTION

Meet the Cooke family: Mother and Dad, brother Lowell, sister Fern, and our narrator, Rosemary, who begins her story in the middle. She has her reasons. “I spent the first eighteen years of my life defined by this one fact: that I was raised with a chimpanzee,” she tells us. “It’s never going to be the first thing I share with someone. I tell you Fern was a chimp and already you aren’t thinking of her as my sister. But until Fern’s expulsion, I’d scarcely known a moment alone. She was my twin, my funhouse mirror, my whirlwind other half, and I loved her as a sister.” Rosemary was not yet six when Fern was removed. Over the years, she’s managed to block a lot of memories. She’s smart, vulnerable, innocent, and culpable. With some guile, she guides us through the darkness, penetrating secrets and unearthing memories, leading us deeper into the mystery she has dangled before us from the start. Stripping off the protective masks that have hidden truths too painful to acknowledge, in the end, “Rosemary” truly is for remembrance.

ABOUT MARYANNE O’HARA

Karen Joy Fowler is the author of three story collections and six novels, one a national bestseller, another a PEN/Faulkner finalist, and all *New York Times* Notable Books. She lives in Santa Cruz, California.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Early on in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, the character Rosemary Cooke tells the reader that she will start her story “in the middle.” Why is it important to her to skip the beginning?
- Rosemary recounts many memories of the chimpanzee Fern and their brief life together. How were she and Fern, in the language of the novel, “Same” and “NotSame”? What does their relationship suggest about the compatibility of humans and primates? How are humans different from other animals?
- How did being co-raised with a chimpanzee impact Rosemary’s development? In what ways was she different from other, “normal” children? How does she still differ from them to this day?
- Consider Rosemary’s father and mother. Are they good parents? Should they have handled Fern’s leaving any differently? If so, how?
- Each member of the Cooke family was dramatically-indeed, traumatically-affected by the loss of Fern. Did they share a personal sense of guilt? Of regret? Of responsibility for what happened? If so, how did these emotions manifest themselves in each family member? How do their responses enrich our understanding of these people?
- What is your opinion of Rosemary’s brother, Lowell Cooke? Are his extreme views and actions at all justified? Does he truly have Fern’s well-being at heart?
- How does Harlow Fielding’s whirlwind entrance into Rosemary Cooke’s world alter Rosemary’s trajectory through life?
- Think about the significance of memory and storytelling in the novel. How is Rosemary’s memory-and, consequently, her narrative-affected by the emotional trauma she has experienced?
- Consider Harlow Fielding and Ezra Metzger’s failed attempt to liberate monkeys from the primate center, both the motivations of these co-conspirators and the outcome itself. Was their mission in any way an admirable act? How were Harlow and Ezra’s intentions different or similar to Lowell’s?
- Do you think Rosemary comes to find peace with her family history by the end of *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*?
- Is animal experimentation ever justified? If so, under what circumstances?