

Velva Jean Learns to Drive by Jennifer Niven - Discussion Guide

*1. *Velva Jean Learns to Drive* begins with this line: "I was ten years old when I was saved for the first time."

- At this particular point in time Velva Jean is referring to religious salvation, but at other times she refers to different kinds of salvation. What are some of the different instances in which Velva Jean and other characters in the novel are saved, either religious or otherwise?

(pgs.) 5-9, 10-11; 58; 148; 185; 255

*2. When Mama dies, the children think their father abandoned her and indirectly caused her death.

- To what extent did Velva Jean carry this resentment through her life?
- When did you realize that Lincoln Hart was looking over his children their entire lives?
- Did the revelation (via Johnny Clay's note) feel true to you, and why (or why not)?

*3. Discuss Velva Jean's life under Sweet Fern's rule in her parents' house.

- Even though we read the story through Velva Jean's perspective, did you feel sympathy for Sweet Fern when she had to take responsibility for her siblings?
- Consider how young Sweet Fern was when she married Danny Deal and how much her youth may have played a part in the way she treated Velva Jean and her brothers.

*4. Velva Jean finds comfort in the years after her mother's death in the close relationship she has with her brother Johnny Clay.

- Discuss the extent to which their friendship and love for one another benefits them both in their youth, and then later when they are young adults dealing with more grown up issues.

*5. Likewise, Harley Bright features prominently in Velva Jean's childhood as someone who represents danger and the unknown. Consider Harley's transformation from juvenile delinquent (leader of the Barrow gang) to suitor of Velva Jean to revival preacher.

- In what ways does Harley Bright influence Velva Jean?

(pgs.) 152-153; 164

- At what moments does he elicit sympathy from the reader, and at what moments do you despise him?

(pgs.) 144; 148; 150; 154; ; 159; 160-161; 184; 187; 190; 232-233; 239; 250; 268-69; 278; 311-312; 321; 359; 361-362

- Is Harley Bright a genuine **antagonist** in this novel?

Antagonist (n.): 1. One who opposes and contends against another; an adversary.
2. The principal character in opposition to the protagonist or hero of a narrative or drama. **Source:** <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/antagonist>

Protagonist (n.): 1. The main character in a drama or other literary work.
3. a. A leading or principal figure. b. The leader of a cause; a champion.
Source: <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/protagonist>

*6. The Wood Carver is another person with whom Velva Jean finds kinship and comfort throughout the novel, even though by reputation he is supposed to be a murderer, and by some accounts, a fantastical creature who shape shifts by the light of the moon and walks around on all fours.

- What does her relationship with the Wood Carver say about Velva Jean as a child and as a young woman?
- What kind of qualities or traits does she exhibit by being his friend?

*7. Twice in her life, Velva Jean runs away with Johnny Clay. Compare the time they run away as children with the time they leave for Waynesville as young adults. In both instances, she returns home, but the result of each journey is different. Discuss what these encounters with life outside of her immediate community do for Velva:

- What does she learn about herself?
- What “truths” about the outside world does each trip confirm, and what do they negate?
- How does each episode act as a catalyst in her life?

(pgs.) 115; 116-119; 123; 302-307

*8. Compare Velva Jean's relationship with Harley Bright to her friendship with Butch Dawkins.

- What was the basis of Velva Jean's attraction to Harley, and what was the basis of her attraction to Butch?

(pgs.) 105-106; 144; 152-153; 242-244; 247-249; 287; 338; 340; 342; 346

- In what way did each man meet different needs in her life? If Butch had returned to Alluvial before Velva Jean left town, would they have worked together?
- Why is it important to Velva Jean's character that she leaves by herself, and not with a man, at the end of the novel?

*9. When Velva Jean receives the yellow truck from Johnny Clay, she knows immediately that she wants to learn to drive.

- What does the truck symbolize for her?
- In what ways does the title of the novel transcend its literal meaning and work on a metaphorical level?

(pgs.) 95; 97; 98-99; 100; 289; 311-312

10. At one point, Velva Jean thinks: "Driving is like music" (pg. 289). What does she mean by this, and what is the importance of singing and music in her life?

(pgs.) 12; 43; 104-105

*11. Discuss the way the attack on Janette Lowe acts as a catalyst for the novel's climax.

- What becomes clear about life on the mountain and the way it has changed over the years?
- What does the rounding up of the outlanders reveal about the local inhabitants?
- More importantly and specifically, what does it reveal about Velva Jean's family?

(pgs.) 351; 374

12. After Velva Jean decides to leave Fair Mountain, she says:

"I was ten years old when I was saved for the first time. I was fifteen when I was saved for the second. But I was eighteen before I was found. All it took was eight years, a panther cat, a tent preacher, a blues singer, a murderer, an old yellow truck, and a road that could take you anywhere." (p. 397) What does she mean by this?

13. What does the Scenic road represent for Velva Jean and her community, both positively and negatively?

(pgs.) 49; 135; 151; 217

14. Daddy Hoyt says of Fair Mountain that it is “the land of the wild things.” (p. 16) What does he mean and what does this reveal about the people and community of Fair Mountain?

*15. How well does Jennifer Niven portray the lives of those living on Fair Mountain?

- Did Velva Jean’s voice, as a narrator, feel authentic?
- How easily were you drawn into the lives of the Hart family and their neighbors?
- Who were your favorite characters, and why?

* Questions taken verbatim or modified from *Velva Jean Learns to Drive* Book Discussion Guide
http://us.penguinroup.com/static/rguides/us/velva_jean_learns_to_drive.html

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