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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Driftless by David Rhodes

Summary

In *Driftless*, Rhodes returns to the Midwestern landscape he knows so well, offering a fascinating and entirely unsentimental portrait of a town apparently left behind by the march of time. Home to a few hundred people yet absent from state maps, Words, Wisconsin, comes richly to life by way of an extraordinary cast of characters.

Discussion Questions

1. *Driftless* is, in part at least, a character study. Which character do you find the most compelling? What was it about the way the author portrayed the character that made the character so compelling? Which character was least compelling? How so?
2. Have you met any *Driftless* characters in your own community? Based on your own experience of the rural Midwest, were any characters difficult for you to believe?
3. It could be argued that one of the main characters in the novel is the rural Midwest itself. Did you find the portrait of the rural Midwest authentic? In what ways did you find it particularly authentic? Was any part of the portrait inauthentic or stereotypical? Why?
4. Would you recommend *Driftless* to someone from New York City or Los Angeles as a way to understand Midwestern culture? Why or why not?
5. David Rhodes sets his story in the small town of Words in the “driftless” region on Wisconsin. Talk about the significance of the town’s name and setting. What is the significance of the novel’s title?
6. *Driftless* is composed of short chapters, each with a title. How does this affect the reader’s experience of the novel?
7. *Driftless* begins and ends with July Montgomery’s story. Talk about the ways July is important to the Words community and to the novel’s structure.
8. The story that develops around Graham and Cora Shotwell introduces some of the changes farmers have faced in the past 30 years. Does the Shotwell’s story ring true? How so or how not?
9. Encounters with a panther, not uncommon in the past few years in the Midwest, weave through the novel. What does the panther and various characters’ reactions to the panther suggest to you?

10. Several characters undergo transformational experiences in *Driftless*. Talk about these. Relate a similar experience you or someone close to you has had.
11. *Driftless* explores serious themes--isolation, spirituality, marital discord, aging and death among them. But the book's tone is often wryly humorous, and Rhodes seems to be gently poking fun at his characters and their experiences. Do you have a favorite example? Was the book's tone upsetting to you, the reader? Was it satisfying? How does Rhodes sustain his humorous tone?
12. David Rhodes describes the inhabitants of Words as "attached more firmly to the past than to the present and only tentatively engaged in the future." This statement is certainly true of many characters as the novel opens. What changes happen by the book's end? Talk about yourself and your community in terms of this statement.

Discussion Questions from IowaCenterfortheBook.org