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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Heart Berries by Terese Mailhot

Summary

A powerful, poetic memoir of a woman's coming of age on the Seabird Island Indian Reservation in the Pacific Northwest.

Having survived a profoundly dysfunctional upbringing only to find herself hospitalized and facing a dual diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and bipolar II disorder, Terese Marie Mailhot is given a notebook and begins to write her way out of trauma.

The triumphant result is *Heart Berries*, a memorial for Mailhot's mother, a social worker and activist who had a thing for prisoners; a story of reconciliation with her father—an abusive drunk and a brilliant artist—who was murdered under mysterious circumstances; and an elegy on how difficult it is to love someone while dragging the long shadows of shame.

Mailhot trusts the reader to understand that memory isn't exact, but melded to imagination, pain, and what we can bring ourselves to accept.

Her unique and at times unsettling voice graphically illustrates her mental state. As she writes, she discovers her own true voice, seizes control of her story, and, in so doing, reestablishes her connection to her family, to her people, and to her place in the world.

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about the horror that was Terese Marie Mailhot's early years—a childhood marked with addiction, poverty, and abuse.
2. In what way is Mailhot's story reflective of the way American Indians have suffered at the hands of white people?
3. In the essay "Indian Sick," what are the multiple diagnoses Mailhot receives in the hospital?
4. What is the significance of the title *Heart Berries*?

5. At one point, Mailhot quips, "Indian girls can be forgotten so well they forget themselves." She also writes that "no one wants to know why Indian women leave or where they go." Why does it seem that native women are treated worse than white women? Is that what Mailhot is saying?
6. Does the process of writing her memoir generate for Mailhot a burgeoning sense of redemption? Does her story follow the typical arc from suffering to happiness ... or not.
7. In her afterward Q&A with Joan Naviyuk Kane, Mailhot insists that she doesn't "feel liberated from the governing presence of tragedy.... [W]e are not liberated from injustice; we're anchored to it." What does she mean? Can anything reverse or correct the injustices done to indigenous people?

Summary from the publisher and Discussion Questions form www.litlovers.com.