



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

North of Normal by Cea Sunrise Person

Summary

Sex, drugs, and . . . bug stew? In the vein of *The Glass Castle* and *Wild*, Cea Sunrise Person's compelling memoir of a childhood spent with her dysfunctional counter-culture family in the Canadian wilderness—a searing story of physical, emotional, and psychological survival.

In the late 1960s, riding the crest of the counterculture movement, Cea's family left a comfortable existence in California to live off the land in the Canadian wilderness. But unlike most commune dwellers of the time, the Persons weren't trying to build a new society—they wanted to escape civilization altogether. Led by Cea's grandfather Dick, they lived a pot-smoking, free-loving, clothing-optional life under a canvas tipi without running water, electricity, or heat for the bitter winters.

Living out her grandparents' dream with her teenage mother Michelle, young Cea knew little of the world beyond her forest. She spent her summers playing nude in the meadow and her winters snowshoeing behind the grandfather she idolized. Despite fierce storms, food shortages, and the occasional drug-and-sex-infused party for visitors, it seemed to be a mostly happy existence. For Michelle, however, now long separated from Cea's father, there was one crucial element missing: a man. When Cea was five, Michelle took her on the road with a new boyfriend. As the trio set upon a series of ill-fated adventures, Cea began to question both her highly unusual world and the hedonistic woman at the centre of it—questions that eventually evolved into an all-consuming search for a more normal life. Finally, in her early teens, Cea realized she would have to make a choice as drastic as the one her grandparents once had in order to save herself.

While a successful international modeling career offered her a way out of the wilderness, Cea discovered that this new world was in its own way daunting and full of challenges. Containing twenty-four intimate black-and-white family photos, *North of Normal* is Cea's funny, shocking, heartbreaking, and triumphant tale of self-discovery and acceptance, adversity, and strength that will leave no reader unmoved.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you read other memoirs that are similar to this – like *The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls or *Educated* by Tara Westover? If so, how does it compare? If not, are you interested in reading more books written by people who had unconventional upbringings?
2. How was Cea’s upbringing different – or similar – to your own?
3. How did Cea’s mother’s actions shape Cea’s future?
4. What character traits – both good and bad – did Cea inherit from her mother? How do you think those traits shaped Cea’s life?
5. What is the significance of the title, “North of Normal”?
6. What are Cea’s main themes?
7. How did you react to the way the book was written? Did it pull you into the story or did it make you feel more detached?
8. Though many details of Cea’s life are disturbing, the tone of the book is not sad or depressing. Discuss the tone of the book and how the author achieved it.
9. Talk about the part of the memoir that affected you the most. Was it something that made you laugh or cry, was it something you found disturbing or heartwarming, or ...?
10. What will you remember about this book a month from now? Will you remember this book a year from now?