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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

The Whip by Karen Kondazian

Summary

The Whip is inspired by the true story of a woman, Charlotte "Charley" Parkhurst (1812-1879) who lived most of her extraordinary life as a man in the old west. As a young woman in Rhode Island, she fell in love with a runaway slave and had his child. The destruction of her family drove her west to California, dressed as a man, to track the killer.

Charley became a renowned stagecoach driver for Wells Fargo. She killed a famous outlaw, had a secret love affair, and lived with a housekeeper who, unaware of her true sex, fell in love with her. Charley was the first known woman to vote in America in 1868 (as a man). Her grave lies in Watsonville, California.

Discussion Questions

1. The river or theme that runs through "The Whip" is the question regarding forgiveness... What would you do if someone destroyed the person you love most? Could you forgive them..? And if not, what would you do?
2. The book is also about strength and survival and putting your arms around life, no matter what life gives you - to make something 'good' out of it. Do you believe that "in every problem there is a 'gift' in it's hand, and that we create the problem because we need the 'gift'?" Give examples of this to be true in your own life. What gifts did Charley discover in her life that came out of her suffering? How did it change her?
3. As a woman in the Old West, it was impossible to live your dreams - unless you were happy to be a wife, teacher (only if you could read) or prostitute. Knowing your own personal dreams--- could you have survived as some women did, living part or all of your life as a man in exchange for the freedom that men had then? Could you have kept that secret and handled the loneliness and emotional isolation that that kind of life engendered?
4. If Charley didn't put on 'britches' and go to California to track down Lee, what do you think might have happened to her?

5. Who were your favorite characters in the book and why?
6. What did you take away from the book to perhaps inspire you to go after a secret dream you've hidden away?

Summary from the publisher and Discussion Questions from the author.