

KIN READING GROUP GUIDE

1. The first chapter of *Kin* takes place in 2017, when Shawna acts as a spokesperson for her community for a segment on a news station, and also spends time with her parents and sister. The newscaster sends Shawna an email with a list of stock shots she'd like to film, including "signs of blight, and signage indicating this is Trump country." How does this beginning frame the ensuing chapters? How does Shawna complicate or subvert commonly held narratives about Appalachian culture throughout the memoir?
2. The Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, about Wilder's rural midwestern childhood in the 1870s, are some of the only entertainment that Shawna is permitted when she lives in The Body religious community. She continues to refer to the books frequently, comparing her own life, in its many iterations, with Laura's. Why did Shawna find so much comfort in the Little House books? How does the effect of these frequent allusions change as she gains clarity and perspective on her family's lifestyle? What was Shawna's intention as a writer in drawing a parallel between her childhood and Laura's, despite a century between the two?
3. How does Shawna's relationship with her father and her understanding of his behavior shift as she ages? When do his actions seem validated by a sense of morality and religiosity, and when are they senseless and terrifying? Are they ever both? At what points does Shawna feel love, respect, fear, resentment, or empathy in relation to her father, and why? How does her mother respond to her father's anger, and to what extent does she act as Shawna's protector?
4. *Kin* alternates chapters from a first-person perspective, moving chronologically through Shawna's coming of age, with chapters written in the third person, reconstructing stories from the lives of her parents and other relatives. Why is the book structured this way, and how does its composition emphasize themes of

shared history and intergenerational trauma? How does a depiction of the family's past help you to understand and empathize with their decisions?

5. How do the first-person recountings differ from the reconstructed anecdotes? How does the experience of reading about a multitude of individuals, from a variety of settings and time periods, compare to reading about one author's memories? To what extent do they form a single collective story, and to what extent do they remain distinct from one another?
6. Shawna attends five different schools before she reaches sixth grade. What does school represent to her, as she exits her insular religious community and rejoins public life? Consider her interactions with teachers and peers. In what way is school a site of punishment or shame, and what is it a source of pride and increased independence?
7. Discuss the role of sexuality in the memoir. What messages does Shawna receive from the Church about sexuality and desire, particularly female sexuality and desire? How do her parents—explicitly or implicitly—reinforce those messages? How does she describe the sexual abuse she experienced at the hands of an adult member of the church? When does Shawna begin to understand her childhood urges and behavior? What does she choose to omit, and why?
8. Shawna describes her parents as having a vacillating level of religious devotion and involvement in the church after they leave The Body. Rules, including what she's allowed to wear and consume, change back and forth accordingly. Additionally, she often finds that her sister is treated differently than her for similar infractions, or isn't tempted to break the rules at all. Discuss the ramifications this kind of inconsistency has on Shawna's psyche. How does Shawna perceive her struggle to behave as she's expected to, and how does her perception of morality and deviancy develop or change?

9. Consider the role of gender and womanhood in Shawna's life. How are women's expectations communicated within the Church and within Shawna's family culture, and when do they conflict with one another? How does Shawna consolidate potentially conflicting messages surrounding womanhood? When does she resist or subvert gendered expectations? How does she respond to her mother's choices, and when does she empathize and help the reader empathize with them?
10. When Shawna's father tells her about the coal mine workers in Kentucky, he says, "Living in bondage like that is a kind of death." Shawna "knew he was thinking of his own father, kneeling to pick coal from the earthen walls that surrounded him, carrying it through dark tunnels like an ant." How, too, are expectations of masculinity oppressive for the men in Shawna's family? How do each of the institutional choices available to her father (the coal industry, the military, and higher education) ultimately fail him? Consider the letters he writes from his military service in Vietnam. In light of these experiences, how do you understand his turn to extremist religion?
11. Shawna writes, "Until we moved to Kentucky, I hadn't really heard my parents talk much about how much money we did or didn't have," but that "the five or six years we lived in Minnesota cost my parents more than I understood at the time." How does financial anxiety permeate the background of Shawna's childhood? Did the Body financially exploit its members? More broadly, how is poverty inherited, and how is it self-perpetuating? Why is it so hard for Shawna and the people in their life to leave their hometowns or to change their cultural or economic status? Why might they choose to stay?
12. What support systems may have helped Shawna succeed in college? To what degree was she internally and externally obstructed from receiving that support?
13. Discuss the memoir's conclusion, wherein Shawna becomes pregnant with her first child and agrees to marry an older man she hardly knows and does not love. She

says that, during her engagement, she “wasn’t suicidal” but “often felt like [her] old dog, Red, when my father had found her chained to a post outside the sewer plant, half-strangled.” How do you explain her decision to marry and her parents’ reactions to the marriage? In what way do her new circumstances feel liberating, and how do they continue to constrain? To what degree has Shawna processed the traumas of her upbringing?