

Unfinished Woman

Robyn Davidson

About the book

In *Unfinished Woman*, Robyn Davidson shares the events of her unusual, adventurous life before and after her famous solo trek across the Australian desert covered in her bestselling memoir, *Tracks*. The nonlinear narrative explores the fallibility of memory, the effects of trauma, and the many people and places who influenced the woman she has come to be.

Her story begins on a cattle property in Queensland, then wanders to the suburbs of Brisbane, to a posh boarding school, the streets of Sydney, a music conservatory, the mountains of India, and apartments in London, eventually landing back in Australia. Davidson journeys around the world and through cultural eras, experiencing first loves and great loves, affairs and losses, grief, and healing. Through it all she carries inside of her the ghostly weight of her mother's suicide.

For discussion

1. The prelude begins with the story of Davidson's gold sandals. What do these sandals, and this story, come to represent in *Unfinished Woman*?
2. Gwen is seventeen years younger than her husband and was raised with less money and privilege than him. How do these things affect their marriage?
3. When introducing her sister's anger in chapter 3, Davidson writes: "We are all conglomerates of habits, thematic sequences set in motion by circumstances we had no hand in." How is this true (or not) for her sister? For her mother and father?
4. Davidson describes their Polish neighbor, Ted, as her "first exogamous love." What do you think it was about him that appealed to her? How was Ted and Bunty's relationship similar to or different from her parents'?
5. Chapter 5 focuses on Davidson's early schooling at Mooloolah State School. How did this small, rural school shape her views on formal education?
6. How did Gwen's parents, Nanna and Grandy, influence Davidson?
7. Davidson writes: "My father's gaze was a romantic gaze. It was directed at the horizon. It contained distances." What do you think of how Davidson views her father?
8. When speaking of why she chose to not have children, Davidson writes: "It bewildered me to see how casually people replicated themselves, without thinking about their fitness for the job or the future happiness of the child." What do you think about this statement?
9. How did Davidson's great-aunt Gladys and aunt Gil model "another way of being female in the world"?
10. Davidson writes: "But we never escape our mothers. Their habits of mind have life in us, either in the way we think, or in opposition to the way we wish to think." What do you think about this idea?

11. Davidson repeats the line: "And no one can live too far outside the clichés of their time." How do you see this play out in Davidson's life?
12. How did Doris Lessing influence Davidson's writing career and life?
13. How did Davidson's twenty-year relationship with Narendra mirror or differ from her parents' relationship? How did you feel about him?
14. In Chapter Fifteen, Davidson writes: "The way memory plays in the mind is not factual. It is sketchy, mythical, misremembered, contradictory. It is flickers of light on unfathomable darkness." How do you see this idea play out in the narrative, and in how Davidson writes it?
15. How did Davidson's experiences in urban Sydney shape who she came to be?
16. Both the prelude and the epilogue end with the sentence: "My mother is as close to me, and as hidden from me, as my own face..." Why do you think Davidson chose to begin and end her memoir with this idea?