

Dancing with the Octopus
Debora Harding

The following questions are intended to enhance your discussion of Debora Harding's *Dancing with the Octopus*.

About this book (from jacket copy)

One Omaha winter day in November 1978, when Debora Harding was just fourteen, she was abducted at knifepoint from a church parking lot. She was thrown into a van, assaulted, held for ransom, and then left to die as an ice storm descended over the city.

Debora survived. She identified her attacker to the police and then returned to her teenage life in a dysfunctional home where she was expected to simply move on. Denial became the family coping strategy offered by her fun-loving, conflicted father and her cruelly resentful mother.

It wasn't until decades later—when beset by the symptoms of PTSD—that Debora undertook a radical project: she met her childhood attacker face-to-face in prison and began to reconsider and reimagine his complex story. This was a quest for the truth that would threaten the lie at the heart of her family, and with it, the sacred bond that once saved her.

Dexterously shifting between the past and present, Debora Harding untangles the incident of her kidnapping and escape from unexpected angles, offering a vivid, intimate portrait of one family's disintegration in the 1970s Midwest. Written with dark humor and the pacing of a thriller, *Dancing with the Octopus* is a literary tour de force and a groundbreaking narrative of reckoning, recovery, and the inexhaustible strength it takes to survive.

For discussion

1. The memoir takes place in Nebraska, Iowa, West Virginia, and England, among other locations. What's the importance of *place* in Harding's story? How has geography shaped her life, and how has she made homes, for herself and loved ones, in different settings?
2. Harding's father (Jim Cackler) is a complex man. What adjectives would you use to describe him? How would you describe his relationship with the protagonist and her sisters?
3. Harding details years of abuse at the hands of her mother (Kathleen Cackler). How did the members of the author's family cope with this abuse? What adaptations did they develop to shield themselves and comfort others?
4. Harding mentions, in her epilogue, that she wants to "portray 'victims' realistically" (372). Before, during, and after the attack, Harding demonstrates remarkable resilience and agency. What does Harding gain from recalling, corroborating, and writing down her experience?
5. Part of Harding's resilience is her ability to accept the help of others. How does her husband Thomas support her? What tools and advice does Dr. H provide?
6. Discuss the role race plays in the narrative. How does Harding work serious considerations of race into the story of her attack and its aftermath? How does Charles Goodwin understand race to have informed his own experiences?

7. Like Charles (Mr. K), Harding’s mother has had significant challenges in life. How does Kathleen explain away, or justify, her abuse of her children and husband? How does Harding balance empathy for Kathleen with her own traumatic memories of her mother’s violence?
8. What forms of support does Harding find in the Omaha community, in the immediate aftermath of her kidnapping and assault? And whom does she rely on when she returns to Omaha as an adult?
9. How is the “dancing octopus” introduced in the narrative? Whose creation is it? And when Harding sees a real octopus, years later, what does she feel? With whom does she share this second experience?
10. Jim eventually reveals his own traumatic memories to Harding. What are these memories, and how does he tell his story? What are the coping mechanisms and kinds of fellowship—productive and unproductive—Jim turns to as he grows older?
11. How does Kathleen respond to Jim’s death?
12. Who are Harding’s role models? What lessons do they teach her?
13. Describe the book’s narrative structure. Why do you think Harding chose to tell her story this way? What insights does this structure make possible for the reader?
14. On finishing the book, do you feel that *justice* has been served—for Harding, her siblings, and others who were harmed? How have characters *repaired*, or tried to repair, their relationships?
15. Which relationships has Harding let go of or moved on from? And what are some of the new, strong relationships she’s forged as an adult?

Further reading

Tara Westover, *Educated*; Rebecca Solnit, *Recollections of My Nonexistence*; Jeannette Walls, *The Glass Castle*; Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*; Garrard Conley, *Boy Erased*; T Kira Madden, *Long Live the Tribe of Fatherless Girls*.