

Reading Group Guide

In order to provide reading groups with the most thought-provoking questions, there are some plot spoilers included in the questions below. We strongly suggest that you finish reading the book before looking at this discussion guide.

1. In the opening scene, we see Duke kill Ben Springfield in revenge for what happened to Jeannie. Do you think Duke's actions are justified? After all, the Springfields knew what they were risking by attacking Duke's family. Or is killing wrong, no matter the circumstances? Does the fact that Ben has two young children change your answer?
2. How does what Harley witnesses affect her? How long do you think children should be sheltered, and what do you think is an appropriate age to begin teaching a child about some of the horrors that exist in the world?
3. Is there ever any justification for killing someone? Should Harley be punished for Dan's death?
4. The McKennas love "hard and fast and only once." Do you think this is a realistic depiction of love? Are there people in your life you feel this fiercely about? Are there crimes that are forgivable, if they're committed in the name of love?
5. *Barbed Wire Heart* has many strong and complicated female characters: Harley, of course, but also Mo, Jeannie, Brooke, Jessa, and Molly, to name just a few. How do you feel about the portrayal of women in *Barbed Wire Heart*? Is there a character you particularly identify with?
6. And what about the men in the novel? Do you feel that Duke, Carl, Will, and the other men are realistically portrayed?
7. Harley and Duke have an incredibly complicated relationship. Do you think they love each other?
8. Duke believes he's doing the best he can for Harley by raising her to be tough and by teaching her to defend herself. Do you agree? Do you think Harley agrees? If you were in Duke's position, would you have made different choices? Is Duke a good father?
9. One of the most heart-wrenching scenes in the book is the one where Duke "kidnaps" young Harley as a test, forcing her to escape from the locked trunk of a car. What do you think Harley learns from this experience? Do you think she learns the lesson Duke meant to teach her?
10. Do you think Harley would have had a better life if Jake had been successful in his attempt to take her away from Duke?

11. At one point, Harley threatens to run away. Why do you think she never does? When Jake tries to rescue her, why doesn't she let him?
12. If you were born into the McKenna family, would you participate in the family business? Or would you leave town, abandoning your family?
13. Why do you think it is so important to Will to find his birth family?
14. What do you think Carl Springfield wants from Harley? Does he want to kill her, or is there something else he wants from her?
15. Carl Springfield attacks Harley three times, and she doesn't tell her father that it was Carl. Why do you think she remains silent?
16. Is a person's personality governed by their genes or by how they've been raised? Do you believe in nature or nurture?
17. Does Harley take after her father or her mother? Both? Neither?
18. In choosing to remain in her hometown rather than escape and forge a new life for herself, Harley feels the weight not only of her father's expectations but also of her responsibility to protect the Rubies and to prevent an even more violent group from coming in to take control of the town. Do you think she makes the right choice in deciding to stay?
19. As Harley gets older, she doesn't always behave the way Duke would like her to—notably, when she insists that Will go to college. How do you think Duke feels about the woman Harley has become?
20. Why do you think Harley chooses to rescue Carl from the fire? Should she have left him inside the burning house?
21. Were you satisfied with the book's ending? Would you call it happy?
22. What meaning did you take from the title? Is a barbed wire heart, ultimately, something to aspire to? Or something to rid oneself of? What is *your* heart made of, would you say?
23. If *Barbed Wire Heart* were to be adapted into a movie, who would you cast in the lead roles?

A Conversation with Tess Sharpe

What inspired you to write this novel?

I started writing this book after I dropped out of college and moved back home. I was working as a maid and listening to a lot of Lucinda Williams and Steve Earle while I cleaned houses. The book was born out of those times I was scrubbing toilets and listening to Lucinda and Steve. Lucinda's work, especially, was very influential. Her voice, her lyrics, the messiness and anger and glory that she captures always carried me through.

It's been so long, I can't pinpoint the moment it all clicked. I do remember that the first scene I wrote was the flashback when Harley is locked in the car trunk. It told me everything I needed to know: about her, about Duke, and about what he was willing to do to his child to prepare her for the life he'd thrust her into. In those first few years, I spent most of my time working on Harley's past—her present took a lot longer to come together.

How long did it take you to write it?

A little less than a decade. I started writing it just after I turned twenty-one, and it was published a handful of days after I turned thirty-one.

What is your writing process like?

I'm pretty settled into my routine. I write full-time and work in several genres and age categories, so I'm usually mid-project on something, revising something else, and in copyedits for a third thing. Most days, I draft for two to four hours, and I spend a lot of time walking in the woods I live in, running dialogue with myself to get scansion and character voice right.

I don't write in order. I like to assemble the book like a puzzle once I feel I have enough pieces. I write thousands of words of backstories and different points of view that I know will never end up in the book but give me the full picture of each of the characters. It's a time-consuming process, not terribly practical, but it's what works for me.

You've also written a novel for young adults—*Far from You*. How was the process of writing a young adult novel different from writing one targeted toward adults? Which one did you enjoy writing more?

Writing books for teenagers is my calling in life—and YA fiction is the reason I managed to survive my difficult teen years. When I write a book for teenagers, the teen audience is what's always at the forefront of my mind, as well as my responsibility to them. Also, teenagers are great bullshit detectors. You can't risk any moments of falseness in books for them. They'll call you on it. That's the great challenge of teen fiction: to be authentic for an ever-evolving group of individuals that's forever changing because teens age out of the category and new teen readers age into it constantly.

Writing an adult book is very different. It's not more difficult, but I view it as a more singular pursuit—something I do first for my own enjoyment. I'm able to make narrative choices that I wouldn't make in a YA book, and that can be such a wonderful challenge.

I like challenges, so I feel really fortunate to write for both adults and teens.

The setting of *Barbed Wire Heart* is so vivid, it feels like another character in its own right. Why did you decide to set this book in rural northern California?

NorCal has always played a huge role in my work. It's where I grew up, and what made me the person and writer that I am. When you say you're from Northern California, most people associate it with the Bay Area, as if the state stops there, and all of NorCal is this progressive haven—but really, the territory north of Sacramento can be very different. When I describe where I grew up—the politics, the poverty, the racism, the remoteness—it surprises a lot of people. But in these mountains and small towns, and in the people who live in them, I've found a wealth of untold and diverse stories that should be told. And I'm very lucky I got to tell this particular story about this particular piece of California.

Harley McKenna is a force to be reckoned with: strong, driven, and full of grit. What inspired her character? Is there anyone in your life you would consider a “Harley”?

Harley is the kind of resilient I wanted to be as a kid. So later on, I invented her. I know that's not the most writerly of answers, but the source is basically this childhood longing that grew up. But over twenty-five years, I've watched the north state suffer as meth took good people down, and the wrong side of the tracks got even meaner, with no end in sight. And now the opiate invasion's in full force, too.

So the communities just get poorer, angrier, and more desperate. And though you put in the work—you donate, you organize, you protest, you try to right wrongs, you help your neighbors—there's always a new goalpost down the road.

No matter what, I always come back to the words, to the story, for comfort and strength. So I created a girl who was powerful enough to save a fictional version of it all.

***Barbed Wire Heart* plays with concepts of freedom and justice—Harley strives to attain both. Do you feel that she succeeds? Is she free at the end? And how about the other characters in the book—do they get justice?**

I think Harley accomplishes what she sets out to do—though there are consequences she didn't quite bargain for. I'm not sure you can ever be free when you're the McKenna. Her life is tied to the county, to the Rubies, to the people. But Harley has control in the end, which is safer than freedom.

What's next?

I have some thriller projects in progress. They're still in the early stages, and I can be a bit superstitious about sharing at this point, but I'll be coming back to NorCal, to the more mountainous regions up near the border, where secrets run deep and when they finally surface, you'd best watch out.

In my YA life, it's all dinosaurs and witches: A *Jurassic World* prequel called *The Evolution of Claire* will be out this summer, as well as my first anthology, *Toil & Trouble*, a collection of feminist short stories about witches by a group of incredible authors that I had the pleasure of co-editing with the amazing Jessica Spotswood.