

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Tara Westover is an American author. Raised in Idaho by a father who opposed public education, she never attended school. She spent her days working in her family’s junkyard or stewing herbs for her mother, a self-taught herbalist and midwife. She was seventeen the first time she set foot in a classroom. After that, she pursued learning for a decade, graduating magna cum laude from Brigham Young University and subsequently winning a Gates Cambridge Scholarship. In 2014 she earned a PhD in history from Trinity College, Cambridge, and currently she is a senior research fellow at the Shorenstein Center at Harvard. *Educated* is her first book. - Author’s website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Why did your group decide to read this book? What were your expectations prior to reading it?
2. “Educated” starts with an epigraph from Virginia Woolf: “The past is beautiful because one never realizes an emotion at the time. It expands later, and thus we don’t have complete emotions about the present, only the past.” What do you think Woolf meant by this? Why do you think Tara Westover chose to begin her memoir this way?
3. In the first pages of “Educated,” we are introduced to the mountain in rural Idaho where the Westover family lives, described as a dark, beautiful and commanding form in a “jagged little patch of Idaho.” How does this setting inform their experience?
4. We are also introduced early in the book to the standoff at Ruby Ridge, a 1992 gunfight between FBI agents and U.S. marshals and a heavily armed family on an isolated homestead. How does this incident cast a shadow over the Westover parents and children, and the survivalism that characterizes their upbringing?
5. In Chapter 5, Westover’s brother Tyler announces that he’s going to college, something none of her other siblings have done. (The two brothers who have left the mountain drive semis and weld scrap.) Why does Westover’s father Gene object to formalized education? How does Tyler’s leaving impact Westover?

6. Westover's quest for an education is a dramatic rebellion by her father's standards. How does her rebellion differ from that of her older brother Tyler, if at all?
7. In the Author's Note, Westover cautions that this memoir is not about Mormonism or "any form of religious belief," and that she rejects a negative or positive correlation between believing or not believing and being kind or not being kind. But her father Gene's faith is a sort of character in this book, informing how he sees the world. What did you make of Chapter 8, "Tiny Harlots," which moves from Gene's distrust of Westover's dance recital uniform to his pride over her singing in church?
8. By Chapter 12, "Fish Eyes," we are introduced to Shawn's abuse of Westover and the other women in his life, which recurs throughout the book. When Westover starts crying over one of these early incidents, she writes that she is crying from the pain, not from Shawn hurting her, and that she sees herself as "unbreakable." She also writes that his abuse not affecting her "was its effect." Why is this insight important?
9. By part two of "Educated," Westover has decided she wants to get an education, has found a way to take the ACT, and has left the mountain to go to college at BYU, despite her father's objections. In her first class at college, Westover recounts not knowing what the word "holocaust" means. Why is this moment significant?
10. Do you think being the youngest child in the family impacted Westover ultimately leaving her family? Would it have made a difference if she'd been the oldest child?
11. Which family member had the biggest influence on Westover's quest for a different life? Which non-family members were influential on her life?
12. Over the course of this book, the Westover family deals with a number of accidents: Westover's brother Tyler falling asleep and driving off the road, Westover's brother Luke catching on fire, and later, a very serious accident for their father. Early on, Westover writes that she thinks "all the decisions that go into making a life — the choices people make, together and on their own, that combine to produce any single event." What do you think she meant by this? How does this insight apply to your own life?
13. Westover's life changes dramatically thanks to an encouraging professor at Brigham Young University. How might her life be different if she hadn't applied for the study abroad program at Cambridge University?
14. Throughout the book, Westover refers back to journals she kept growing up. Sometimes, she recorded events as they really felt, but many times, she says she presented events as less traumatic than they really were, or used "vague, shadowy language" to obscure how she'd been hurt. How do these journals inform the book?
15. By Chapter 22, Westover writes that her life was often "narrated for me by others. Their voices were forceful, emphatic, absolute. It had never occurred to me that my voice might be as strong as theirs." What is the significance of this realization? Do you identify at all with this?
16. At BYU, Tara recounts going to a professor for moral advice, and instead getting advice that she should apply for a very competitive study abroad at Cambridge University, which she'd never imagined she could qualify to do. "He'd seemed to say, 'First find out what you are capable of, then decide who you are,'" she writes. Has

anyone ever given you advice to do something beyond what you thought you were capable? Did you follow it?

17. Westover's mother is a midwife and herbalist. How does her perception of these kinds of healing change over the course of her life? How does working change her?
18. Westover writes that her father looked slumped when she left for Cambridge, an expression of "love and fear and loss" because when she's across the ocean he can't keep her safe. How did you view her relationship with her father, and did your perception of that relationship change throughout the book?
19. After Westover decides to continue her education, she finds it increasingly difficult to reconcile her life on the mountain with her new life as a student of history. She writes that she had a "fractured mind." Does it seem to you that she must lose one life to gain another?
20. What impact does Westover's pursuit of formal education have on her parents and family? How does education change Westover's view of her childhood? How does she come to terms with how she was raised once she knows the value of education?
21. One of the most difficult scenes in the book comes near the end, when Westover realizes that Shawn has killed his dog Diego after coming to her parents' house with a knife in hand. How does this moment change things for Westover?
22. One professor describes Westover as "Pygmalion," while Westover herself at one point says she believed she could "be remade, my mind recast" at her university. And in the end, she writes that she is a "changed person" from the person she was as her father's daughter, and from her 16-year-old self. "You could call this selfhood many things," she writes. "Transformation. Metaphorosis. Falsity. Betrayal. I call it an education." What do you make of these final lines?
23. Westover makes great efforts to ensure the story is as objective as possible, including footnotes where accounts of an event differ, or comparing her diary entries to her memory. As a reader, how important is objectivity in this story, and more largely, in memoirs in general?
24. Looking back over the book, what did you learn about family and forgiveness and trauma? What did you learn about education?
25. Overall, did you and your group enjoy this book? Did it meet your expectations, exceed them, or disappoint you? Would you recommend this book to someone you know?

<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/550168/educated-by-tara-westover/9780399590504/readers-guide/>

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

To the Westovers, public education was the quickest way to put yourself on the wrong path. By the time the author, the youngest Westover, had come along, her devout Mormon parents had pulled all of their seven children out of

school, preferring to teach just the essentials: a little bit of reading, a lot of scripture, and the importance of family and a hard day's work. Westover's debut memoir details how her isolated upbringing in the mountains of Idaho led to an unexpected outcome: Cambridge, Harvard, and a PhD. Though Westover's entrance into academia is remarkable, at its heart, her memoir is a family history: not just a tale of overcoming but an uncertain elegy to the life that she ultimately rejected. Westover manages both tenderness and a savage honesty that spares no one, not even herself: nowhere is this more powerful than in her relationship with her brother Shawn, her abuser and closest friend. In its keen exploration of family, history, and the narratives we create for ourselves, *Educated* becomes more than just a success story. — Amanda Winterroth.

Publisher's Weekly

/ Starred Review */* A girl claws her way out of a claustrophobic, violent fundamentalist family into an elite academic career in this searing debut memoir. Westover recounts her upbringing with six siblings on an Idaho farm dominated by her father Gene (a pseudonym), a devout Mormon with a paranoid streak who tried to live off the grid, kept four children (including the author) out of school, refused to countenance doctors (Westover's mother, Faye, was an unlicensed midwife who sold homeopathic medicines), and stockpiled supplies and guns for the end-time. Westover was forced to work from the age of 11 in Gene's scrap and construction businesses under incredibly dangerous conditions; the grisly narrative includes lost fingers, several cases of severe brain trauma, and two horrible burns that Faye treated with herbal remedies. Thickening the dysfunction was the author's bullying brother, who physically brutalized her for wearing makeup and other immodest behaviors. When she finally escaped the toxic atmosphere of dogma, suspicion, and patriarchy to attend college and then grad school at Cambridge, her identity crisis precipitated a heartbreaking rupture. Westover's vivid prose makes this saga of the pressures of conformity and self-assertion that warp a family seem both terrifying and ordinary. (Feb.) --Staff (Reviewed 12/11/2017) (Publishers Weekly, vol 264, issue 50, p).

School Library Journal

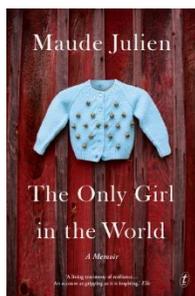
/ Starred Review */* Raised in an alternative Mormon home in rural Idaho, Westover worked as an assistant midwife to her mother and labored in her father's junkyard. Formal schooling wasn't a priority, because her parents believed that public education was government indoctrination and that Westover's future role would be to support her husband. But her older brother's violence and their family's refusal to acknowledge problems at home resulted in the teen contemplating escape through education. Admittance to Brigham Young University was difficult. Westover taught herself enough to receive a decent score on the ACT, but because of her upbringing, she didn't understand rudimentary concepts of sanitation and etiquette, and her learning curve was steep. However, she eventually thrived, earning scholarships to Harvard and Cambridge—though she grappled with whether to include her toxic family in her new life. Born in 1986, Westover interviewed family members to help her write the first half. Her well-crafted account of her early years will intrigue teens, but the memoir's second part, covering her undergraduate and graduate experiences in the "real world," will stun them. VERDICT A gripping, intimate, sometimes shocking, yet ultimately inspiring work. Perfect for fans of memoirs about overcoming traumatic childhoods or escaping from fundamentalist religious communities, such as Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle* and Ruth Wariner's *The Sound of Gravel*. —Sarah Hill, Lake Land College, Mattoon, IL --Sarah Hill (Reviewed 05/01/2018) (School Library Journal, vol 64, issue 5, p112).

Kirkus

A recent Cambridge University doctorate debuts with a wrenching account of her childhood and youth in a strict Mormon family in a remote region of Idaho. It's difficult to imagine a young woman who, in her teens, hadn't heard of the World Trade Center, the Holocaust, and virtually everything having to do with arts and popular culture. But so it was, as Westover chronicles here in fairly chronological fashion. In some ways, the author's father was a classic anti-government paranoiac—when Y2K failed to bring the end of the world, as he'd predicted, he was briefly

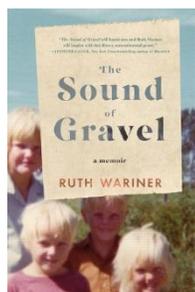
humbled. Her mother, though supportive at times, remained true to her beliefs about the subordinate roles of women. One brother was horrendously abusive to the author and a sister, but the parents didn't do much about it. Westover didn't go to public school and never received professional medical care or vaccinations. She worked in a junkyard with her father, whose fortunes rose and fell and rose again when his wife struck it rich selling homeopathic remedies. She remained profoundly ignorant about most things, but she liked to read. A brother went to Brigham Young University, and the author eventually did, too. Then, with the encouragement of professors, she ended up at Cambridge and Harvard, where she excelled—though she includes a stark account of her near breakdown while working on her doctoral dissertation. We learn about a third of the way through the book that she kept journals, but she is a bit vague about a few things. How, for example, did her family pay for the professional medical treatment of severe injuries that several of them experienced? And—with some justification—she is quick to praise herself and to quote the praise of others. An astonishing account of deprivation, confusion, survival, and success. (Kirkus Reviews, December 1, 2017).

READALIKES



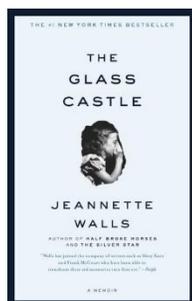
***The Only Girl in the World* by Maude Julien**

Describes the author's harrowing upbringing by fanatic parents, who raised her in isolation through traumatic disciplinary exercises designed to "eliminate weakness," and recounts how she eventually escaped with the help of an outsider.



***The Sound of Gravel* by Ruth Wariner**

An account of the author's coming-of-age in a polygamist Mormon Doomsday cult describes her childhood on a Mexico hills farm as one of her father's more than 40 welfare-dependent children, the extreme religious beliefs that haunted her daily life and her escape in the aftermath of a devastating tragedy.



***The Glass Castle* by Jeannette Walls**

The child of an alcoholic father and an eccentric artist mother discusses her family's nomadic upbringing, during which she and her siblings fended for themselves while their parents outmaneuvered bill collectors and the authorities.