

TOUCH AND GO

By Thad Nodine

Discussion Guide

About This Book

Kevin's family is anything but orthodox, made up of his caretaker Isa, her husband Patrick (both in recovery from addiction, like Kevin), and their two foster kids Devon and Ray. When this foster family takes off from their home in California to visit Isa's dying father in Florida, their fragile balance teeters even as their relationships deepen. Isa's emotional state becomes less stable. Patrick runs afoul of the law and is constantly searching for get-rich schemes. Kevin begins to doubt his affection for Isa and his place in the family, just as Ray and Devon start to depend on him more. By the end, Kevin has to figure out how to make things right -- for Ray and Devon, and for himself.

As well as being a family story, this is a multicultural one -- the adults are white, Devon is black and Ray is Latino -- yet it's minus the simplistic political and ideological badges. After all, narrator Kevin cannot see color. And this is a story of discovery that reverses the tried and true American mythologies of the California Cure, the Kerouac romantic journey, and the Hollywood happy ending. Instead we start in Burbank, drive East, and learn who we are by traveling where we've been. We all carry the past around somewhere, hidden in suppressed memories or, like this crew, as a coffin stuffed with old bones atop a broken-down station wagon. Who we are often has more to do with where we come from than where we pretend we're headed.

Discussion Questions

1. *Touch and Go* has a full cast of strong characters. Whom did you find sympathetic? Did your sympathies change over the course of the book?
2. What does it feel like to experience things through Kevin's perspective? Are there particular scenes, or descriptions, that pop out for you because of the unique narration? How so?
3. Family relationships are complicated in *Touch and Go*, with overlap between families of choice and biological families. Consider the family on the road trip, Isa's brother Robert's family, the family in Texas that Natalie is staying with, and Patrick's family. How do these families function? How does the road-trip crew change behaviors when they move into different family groups?
4. Caretaking is also complicated in this book. Kevin is neither a foster or biological parent to Ray or Devon, but still takes on a strong role with them. Why does he take on this role? How do they, in turn, care for him?
5. What are the reasons (secret and public) why each character goes on the road trip? How do these reasons help the trip go awry?

6. Why do many chapters begin with the characters standing on thresholds?
7. Consider how the relationship between Patrick and Devon changes during the book. Were you surprised by this? In hindsight, what is *not* surprising about it?
8. We experience Katrina through Kevin's perspective, entirely lacking in visuals except as reported by the other characters. Discuss the reading experience -- was it more visceral? More suspenseful? Harder to imagine, or just as easy?
9. Several times during the storm Kevin tries to help people from the neighboring houses, and each time he is almost lost himself. Why does he keep trying? Is he deluded to think he can be useful in this way? In a broader sense, how do people try to help others in this book, and what happens when they do?
10. Did Isa jump or fall? What do you think she really said?
11. Kevin notes that the national media coverage is focused on New Orleans, and ignores other locations like Biloxi. Can you name other cities affected? *The New York Times* has a set of interactive maps and albums of areas damaged by the hurricane (http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/national/2005_HURRICANEKATRINA_GRAPHIC/) -- are you surprised by any of the information presented?
12. Who is most blind in this book? Who is most disabled by their past?
13. How would each of the main characters define strength? How would you define it?
14. How does Kevin change during the story?
15. Have you read other novels that capture the experiences of someone who is blind, or disabled? Consider representations of the blind in literature/pop culture; how do they match up with the author's portrayal of Kevin? How do they differ?
16. What are the roles of Betsy, Charlie, Katrina, and the coffin in this book? In what ways can each be considered a character? Each is also symbolic -- but of what?
17. *Touch and Go* is a multicultural journey by a family of outcasts who leave Los Angeles, skirt a lively border in the Southwest, and drive into the heart of the South. What is American -- if anything -- about these people and this journey? What stereotypes are presented along the way, and which ones break down?

Addendum: Other Blind Characters in Fiction

- Homer in *Homer & Langley* (E.L. Doctorow)
- Sammy in *How Late It Was, How Late* (James Kelman)
- Teresa in *How to Paint a Dead Man* (Sarah Hall)
- Robert in *Cathedral* (Raymond Carver)
- Homer Barbee in *Invisible Man* (Ralph Ellison)
- Jorge in *Name of the Rose* (Umberto Eco)
- Johnny in *Johnny Got His Gun* (Dalton Trumbo)