

Sunset Over Chocolate Mountains

by Susan Elderkin



About the Book

Meet Theobald Moon?eccentric English expatriate, compulsive overeater, and doting father to young Josephine. We encounter the Moons leading a contented, solitary life in their own remote corner of the Arizona desert. But things weren't always so solitary?Theo's life was once turned upside down when a couple of Slovakian wanderers turned up in his patch of desert, changing his existence forever. And now their contentment once again is threatened by Josephine's need to know about the secrets of her father's past, and her own. With an engagingly eccentric cast of characters, and far-flung settings ranging from a Slovakian shoe factory to the Arizona desert, Betty Trask award-winning author Susan Elderkin weaves a touching and enchanted story about finding love, happiness, and belonging, even in the most unlikely of places.

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you suppose the author chose Arizona for the novel's setting? Consider the various ways the desert is described. Which are positive? Which are negative? What role does it play for each character, and what relationship do they have with their surroundings (pp. 88-89)? Do their relationships to the desert surroundings evolve throughout the story?
2. Consider the novel's narrative structure. Why do you think the author chose to have Josie narrate from the first-person point of view, while both Theo and Eva's stories are told from the third-person point of view? Is Elderkin saying something about the contrasts between childhood and adulthood? About dreams versus reality, or better yet, innocence versus experience?

3. When Theo is telling Josie a story, he makes the statement "Little girls don't go very far" (p. 13). Consider this statement, both literally and figuratively, in light of what happens to Josie and Eva, the main female characters in this story. Is it true of Josie? Is it true of Josie's mother, Eva?
4. Theo is described as being extremely overweight owing to his compulsive overeating. Are food and eating a substitute for something else missing in his life (pp. 28-30)? Now consider that all of Theo's pet names for Josie are the names of foods: Sugar Pie, Jell-O, etc. What correlation between food and affection does this point out? Is it consonant with Theo's general attitudes about food and the role it plays for him?
5. Sometimes role reversal is apparent in the relationship between Josie and her father. Consider the passage when Theo wakes Josie up in the middle of the night (pp. 7-8). In what ways is Josie like the adult and Theo like the child? What about when Theo drops Josie off for her first day of school (pp. 141-144). What other examples can you find in the novel? Does their relationship change and mature throughout the story?
6. Josie's background is unusual, but she's typical when it comes to teenage rebellion. What provokes this in her? What are Theo's reactions to this change in his daughter? What's the end result of Josie's rebellion? How does she react to this experience?
7. The notions of belonging and being an outsider are both important in the story, and the characters find belonging in the very places where they were initially outsiders. Talk about the ways in which Theo is an outsider and where he comes to belong. What about Jersey (p. 201)? And Josie?
8. Think about Theo's characteristics as an adult. Now, imagine what you think he was like as a child and describe him. What do you think Josie will be like as an adult, compared with how she is as a child?
9. The reader gets occasional discomfiting glimpses of Theo's relationship with his own mother (p.114) and his Auntie Drew (p.124). How would you characterize these relationships? Are they healthy? How is Theo's relationship with his own daughter different from the ones he had with his older relatives?
10. Theo's explorations of spirituality lead him to the statement that "you get what you want; what you think you deserve" from the universe (p. 166). What do you think Theo wants from the universe? When does Theo finally become aware of what he wants? Does he get it? What about the other characters? what do they deserve, and do they get it?
11. Tibor is first introduced as a Romany, or gypsy—a group of wanderers generally regarded as notoriously unreliable and untrustworthy. Although he is not Romany, does the description fit him? How is Tibor typically Romany?
12. Consider how the statement—"If you don't know somebody's past, you will not know their future" (p. 111)—applies to each of the characters in the story. In what ways is the statement especially relevant to both Josie and Tibor?
13. As the novel points out, "The problem with solitude . . . is that when you're alone, you get used to being alone. But as soon as the solitude is broken, even if only for a moment, you become lonely all over again" (p. 194). When, and by whom, is Theo's solitude broken? What happens as a result of this intrusion? Does Theo welcome it?
14. Various kinds of love are very important in the story. There's a spin on love at first sight when Eva and Tibor first

meet (p. 39), a conventional romantic-love story between Jersey and Cindy, Theo's search to find someone to love, and the quest for self-love that both Theo and Josie undertake. Talk about the ways that some of these love stories are conventional or unconventional and how each kind of love affects the lives of the characters it touches.

Author Bio

Critical Praise

"In the seductive beauty of its language and its narrative skill, *Sunset Over Chocolate Mountains* is outstanding. . . . A hugely original, mesmerizing and memorable read."

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