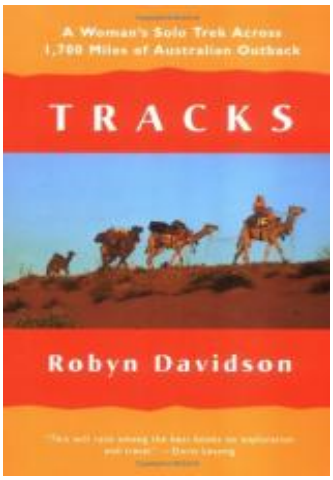
ReadingGroupGuides
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Tracks

by Robyn Davidson



About the Book

The questions, discussion topics, and author biography that follow are intended to enhance your group's reading of Robyn Davidson's **Tracks**. We hope they will provide you with several new avenues for discussion about this exhilarating and provocative story of travel, adventure, and self-discovery.

Robyn Davidson, a young woman who had "never changed a light-bulb, sewn a dress, mended a sock, changed a tyre, or used a screwdriver" [p. 93], took a train to Alice Springs in central Australia with six dollars in her pocket and a wildly unrealistic ambition: to capture wild camels, train them, and then cross the great desert of Western Australia with them. Her journey is an exploit in the extravagant tradition of the great Victorian explorers, but Robyn Davidson is not only an explorer, but also a young woman who wishes to get past the negativity and alienation of modern, urban existence and seek fulfillment in close harmony with the natural world. Testing her physical and emotional resources to the limit, Davidson crosses half of Australia on foot, in the process coming to know the desert, the rhythms of traditional Aboriginal society, and herself. Robyn Davidson seeks transformation, epiphany, and freedom, and eventually she finds these things. Her story turns out to be not of a hand-to-hand battle with the forces of nature but of a passionate love affair with them.

Discussion Guide

1. Davidson begins her book with a quotation from Doris Lessing's **The Golden Notebook**. Why do you think she has chosen this particular passage? What burdens does Davidson herself shed during the course of her journey? Does she shed them permanently?

2. "They say paranoia attracts paranoia: certainly no one else I met ever had such a negative view of Alice Springs" [p.23]. To what extent do you think that Davidson colors Alice, its white and black inhabitants, its architecture, and its social mores with her own pre-judices and preoccupations? What is it in Robyn Davidson's character that forms her

opinion of the city?

3. Davidson is passionately determined to shed her own sense of herself as traditionally "feminine," a quality she sees as arising from "the weakness of animals who have always been prey" [p.30] and from being trained from birth to be "sweet, pliable, forgiving, compassionate and door-mattish" [p.48]. Does Davidson's anger at the way women in her culture are conditioned abate at all during the course of the narrative? Does she at any point confront her own ambivalence about the idea of "femininity"? Do you feel that the Australian tradition of misogyny, as Davidson describes it, is common in American society?

4. At one point Davidson defines the substance of her inner world as "desert, purity, fire, air, hot wind, space, sun, desert desert desert" [p.50]. Why has the desert been so powerfully attractive to many people, including Davidson? (See the list of suggested reading below.) What is Davidson's own fantasy about what she will find in the desert? Does that fantasy come true, or does the desert offer her different, unexpected gifts?

5. One of the lessons Davidson learns on her journey is that solitude is a condition to be prized rather than feared. At what point in her journey did she come to this realization? What brought it about? Is the value of solitude a universal truth, or valid only for certain individuals? Does our contemporary Western life-style engender a fear of solitude? Is such a fear unhealthy or natural?

6. During her trip Davidson harbors some hostility toward **National Geographic**, feeling that her association with the magazine has robbed her trip of the purity and self-reliance she had originally conceived for it. Do you feel that her attitude is justified? Do you think that, in the end, she regretted her decision to accept the financial support of the magazine? Do you believe that her project was in any way compromised by this association?

7. Aboriginal ideas of nature, ownership, time, ritual, ceremony, and wisdom differ enormously from white ones. Why is the subconscious mind so very important in the Aboriginal way of life? What brings about Davidson's own increasing reliance on her subconscious? Does the Aborigines' world view mean that they can never succeed within a Western-style economic and educational system? Does Davidson imply that the Aborigines' position within the white continent is finally a hopeless one?

8. What does the word "primitive" usually imply? Is that word applicable in any way to Aboriginal society? Is it a word that tends to be subjective, or does it have certain fixed meanings? And what about the word "superstition"?

9. Sometimes Davidson's friends accuse her of "anthropomorphism" in dealing with her camels and her dog. Does this seem a relevant or accurate response to Davidson's way of thinking? To Aborigines, as to Native Americans, our culture's stricture against anthropomorphism would seem absurd. Do you believe that the Western notion of man as being intrinsically different and independent from the rest of the natural world is valid or invalid?

10. For reasons of her own, Davidson dislikes photography and photographers. These feelings prejudice her against Rick from their first meeting: she sees him as the typical photographer, hiding behind his lens and creating images that are projections of his own imagination rather than records of reality. Does Davidson come to change her thinking as she gets to know Rick? How does Rick himself change? How might Rick's version of this story differ from Davidson's?

11. "Why was everyone so goddamn affected by this trip, adversely or otherwise? Had I stayed back home...I would not

have been up for all these astounding projections" [p.101]. Why are Davidson's exploits vicariously exciting to some people, threatening to others? If her journey does indeed "hit some soft spot in this era's passionless, heartless, aching psyche" [p.237], how can this be explained?

12. Back home in Brisbane, Davidson writes, I "had been sick of carrying around the self-indulgent negativity which was so much the malaise of my generation, my sex and my class" [p.50]. Do you find that the kind of generational negativity she describes (though she is describing a period almost twenty years ago) manifests itself in our contemporary American culture--in our attitudes to political action, to our environment, to our friends and family?

13. One of the goals of Davidson's personal quest is "freedom." To be free, she writes, "is to learn, to test yourself constantly, to gamble. It is not safe" [p.222]. Do you agree with this judgment? How would you yourself define freedom? How might one achieve real freedom in one's own life without taking steps as drastic Davidson's? Or is the taking of drastic steps a necessary part of the process?

14. Davidson gives numerous examples of the laws, both written and unwritten, that exclude Aboriginal people from the mainstream of Australian life and ensure their permanent poverty and marginalization. How do racial attitudes in Australia resemble, or differ from, those in the United States? Is the social and economic plight of the Aborigines comparable to that of Native Americans? Davidson herself compares Australian government policy with that of the earlier apartheid governments of South Africa. What are the stated purposes of such policies in all three countries? What do you believe to be the actual, unstated purposes?

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Author Bio

Robyn Davidson was born on a cattle property in Queensland. She moved to Sydney in the late '60s, then returned to study in Brisbane before going to Alice Springs to prepare for her journey across the Australian desert. Davidson?s first book TRACKS, her account of this crossing, was an international sensation, and was adapted for a film starring Mia Wasikowska and Adam Driver. She has traveled extensively, and has lived in London, New York and India. In the early 1990s, Davidson migrated with and wrote about nomads in north-west India. She is now based in regional Victoria but spends some time each year in India.

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