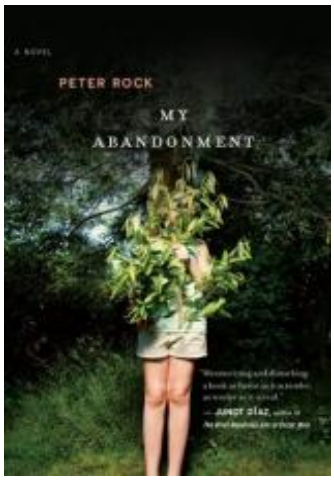
My Abandonment

by Peter Rock



About the Book

A 13-year-old girl and her father live in Forest Park, an enormous nature preserve in Portland, Oregon. They inhabit an elaborate cave shelter, wash in a nearby creek, store perishables at the water's edge, use a makeshift septic system, tend a garden, even keep a library of sorts. Once a week they go to the city to buy groceries and otherwise merge with the civilized world. But one small mistake allows a backcountry jogger to discover them, which derails their entire existence, ultimately provoking a deeper flight.

Inspired by a true story and told through the startlingly sincere voice of its young narrator, Caroline, **My Abandonment** is a riveting journey into life at the margins and a mesmerizing tale of survival and hope.

Discussion Guide

1. When the book opens, Caroline and Father are scavenging scrap metal from a junk yard. ? ?You see, Caroline,? Father says, ?all the work I?m doing here for these people, organizing all these different things. This is how we are paying them back for what we?re taking? ? (p. 4). Why is it important to Father to ?pay back? for what they take? Is Father concerned with morality? Can you find other examples where he justifies an action that others might think is wrong? How does Caroline see Father?s actions? Does the way Caroline judges Father change over the course of the book?

2. ? ?Look carefully, Caroline. There?s a lesson here. It?s better homework than being in school, that?s for certain? ? (p. 5). Since Caroline doesn?t go to school, she is essentially ?home-schooled? by Father. What kind of a teacher is Father? Do you agree that there are some things that children can learn better outside of school?

3. On page 6, Father says, ? ?We?re lucky?We?re the lucky ones.? ? Why does Father think they?re the lucky ones? What does he value in life? To what extent does Caroline share those values? Can you find places in the book where she seems to want a different life than Father does? By the end of the book, what has Caroline come to value? Does she have

the same values as Father?

4. Consider the home that Caroline and Father have made in the forest park. Are they comfortable? How does their home differ from those of the other people who live in the park?

5. On page 14, Father says, ? ?Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes.? ? This is a quotation from Thoreau?s Walden. Father quotes from Thoreau and two other writers throughout; at the end of the book, Caroline discovers who they are. How are your feelings about Father affected by knowing what he?s reading and thinking about? Do you think that Caroline and Father are living a sort of Thoreauvian idyll in the early pages of the book? Is it more difficult to go ?back to the land? now than it was in Thoreau?s day?

6. On page 26, Caroline says, ?Father is strict. He has to be strict. That doesn?t mean he knows everything I do or think.? What are some of the ways Caroline asserts her independence? Are her ?rebellions? appropriate for her age?

7. ?The trees are a solid changing green and as you come closer they break apart and separate so you can see how it works? (p. 25). In creating Caroline?s voice, the author employs a particular, sometimes unusual, syntax. What does the way she speaks (or writes --- is Caroline?s voice in the book a spoken voice or a written one? How do we know?) tell the reader about the kind of person she is?

8. ?The hinged back of a book. Strength of character or strength of willpower. A sharp or bony projection such as found on a porcupine? (p. 28). What is she talking about here? Find other examples of digressions of this sort in the book. How do these passages function in the book?

9. If Caroline and Father are living in a kind of natural, innocent state at the beginning of the book, that all changes when their home is discovered. What is the incident that precedes their being discovered? Is this ?fall from grace? Caroline?s fault? Why or why not?

10. What is Caroline?s understanding of sex? Sex is almost never mentioned explicitly in the book, but how does the author use the threat of molestation or rape to create tension or uncertainty? Is there an actual danger here, or do we as readers project the threat onto these characters?

11. What do you think of Miss Jean Bauer? ? ?We?re trying to find out what it looks like inside you, by the stories you tell,? ? (p. 68), she says to Caroline. Do you think she did a good job of talking to Caroline? What did she see in Caroline?

12. On page 76, Caroline describes the book Miss Jean Bauer gave her: ?The wizard in this book is called Sparrowhawk but that is not his real name. Almost no one knows his real name. The magic in this place is all about naming, knowing the real name of a thing or a person. Then you can control them. And a thing can be changed into another thing as long as it is renamed and the spell lasts.? How are names used in the book? Where do we see an ambiguity of naming, or a multiplicity of names? What is the significance of this passage to Caroline?s story as we come to know it?

13. When Caroline and Father leave Mr. Walters?s house and return to Portland, they can?t live in the park anymore. How is their experience of being homeless in the city different from being homeless in the park.

14. Caroline and Father spend the night with Susan and Paul when they are lost in the cold. The next day, Father tells Caroline to go outside and play with Paul. Caroline is skeptical of Susan and Paul but, she says, ?Father sees something in them to trust, I can tell. He?s not even looking at me as I scrape the door open.? Why does Father trust Susan?

15. At the end of chapter six, Caroline tells how she and Father came to be together. What do you think of this story, and of how Caroline tells it? Is she a reliable narrator? ? ?If I weren?t your father,? he says, ?how could I have walked right into your backyard and walked away with you and no one said a word?? ? (p. 191). Does this story change the way you feel about Father?

16. When she reads Father?s journal after his death, she finds quotations from books he was reading. The title of the book (My Abandonment) is taken from one of these quotations: ?The way of life is wonderful. It is by abandonment? (p. 200). What did this quotation by Emerson mean to Father? What does it mean to Caroline? What is ?her abandonment??

17. When Caroline is in Boise, she goes back to see the house she had lived in with her ?foster family.? Do you think they really were a foster family? What do you make of her interaction, or lack thereof, with her sister?

18. At the end of the book, Caroline is living alone in an eight-sided yurt. ?Father and I are a family of writers? (p. 223), she says, and she is writing the story of her life: "all my piles of papers and artifacts from all the times, how I have broken it down to organize my story and be able to tell it?eight piles, one for each wall? (pp. 221?222). Caroline has structured her story the way she has ?constructed? her house; she?s almost literally living inside her story. And, of course, the eight chapters of Caroline?s story are the eight chapters of **My Abandonment**. Think about these two uses of ?structure? or ?constructed.? In what way do we all construct the stories of our lives? How do we live in our own stories?

Author Bio

Peter Rock is the author of such works of fiction as MY ABANDONMENT, which was adapted into the film *Leave No Trace*, directed by the award-winning Debra Granik (*Winter?s Bone*). He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, among numerous other distinctions. He is a professor of creative writing at Reed College and lives in Portland, OR, with his wife and two daughters.

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