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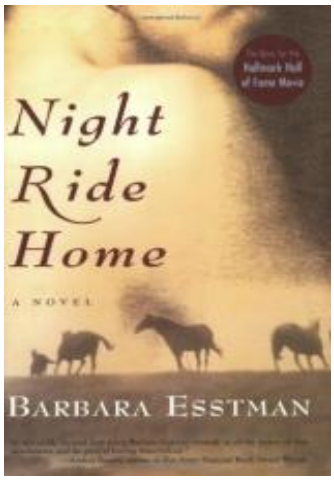
Night Ride Home

by Barbara Esstman



About the Book

Set in a small town outside of St. Louis shortly after World War II, **Night Ride Home** is the story of a family coming to terms with the death of its eldest child, Simon. Simon's mother Nora boards and trains horses on a farm nherited from her grandmother, though Nora's husband Neal resents her passion for them. After Simon is killed in a riding accident, Neal shoots the horse that Simon was riding. The horse was Nora's favorite--a beautiful and spirited Arabian. Neal then sends the rest of the horses away, and tries to sell the farm. When Nora refuses to leave, Neal moves to Chicago and takes their daughter Clea with him. Neal seeks to define the life Nora will take up in the wake of Simon's death. But another man, Nora's teenage love, Ozzie, returns to the farm in an attempt to help Nora piece together a life of her own choosing.

In five alternating voices, **Night Ride Home** examines both the bitter grief and the binding love of the extended Mahler family. Neal's voice rationalizes his desire to control his family. Nora's voice stumbles through the maze of her sorrow. Clea, the daughter, walks a fine line between her parents. Nora's mother, Maggie, examines decisions made in her own her life. And, finally, the ranch hand Ozzie opens his battle-weary heart to love.

Discussion Guide

1. Simon Mahler's grandmother Maggie laments: "A child should not die before his parents. A terrible disorder was at large in the world." But Simon's death creates a "disorder" that goes beyond the tragedy inherent in the loss of a child. In many ways, Simon was the hub that connected the characters who narrate the novel. What did Simon mean to the other characters?

2. The novel reveals a variety of responses to grief. The townspeople admire Neal for his restrained response to Simon's death, and shake their heads at Nora's "hysterics." But experts tell us that an emotional response to loss is a normal, healthy response. Contrast how Neal and Nora respond to Simon's death. Are there "right" and "wrong" ways to grieve?

What are they?

3. When the tragedy occurs, Clea is a girl on the brink of becoming a woman. She retreats to her room and both literally and figuratively attempts to disappear. What has been modeled for her by the women in her life? Does she repeat or rebel against what she has seen?

4. While some experts contend that electroshock therapy has been used effectively to control depression, Esstman's research revealed that shock therapy was also used during the time period of **Night Right Home** on women deemed too independent by their husbands. What do you think was behind Neal's decision to subject Nora to shock therapy--a desire to help Nora or to subdue her independence? What responses to "undesirable behavior" occur today?

5. Ozzie was wounded in W.W.II and spent years wandering. He tells us that he "had dreams a lot, about dead men that I believed I could have saved." Today we might say that a veteran like Ozzie suffered from post-traumatic stress syndrome. How does the war appear to have affected Ozzie in ways of which even he is not aware?

6. Farm life is tied closely to the natural cycle of the seasons. The four sections of the novel correspond to the four seasons--spring through winter. What happens in each season? Do the events of each season reflect our common notions of spring, summer, fall and winter?

7. Late in the novel, Nora breaks down in Ozzie's truck after he has brought her to see an Arabian filly, Malaak. Why does Ozzie bring her back to talk to the filly's owner? What is he asking her to do? How is this the turning point of the novel for Nora?

8. Quotations from Chilean poet Pablo Neruda precede each section of the book. How do the epigraphs reflect the events and the themes of the novel?

9. Five characters take turns narrating the chapters of this book. Esstman has said that these are "all characters who have buried part of the truth." What do various characters see that others have "buried"? How would this novel be changed if it had a single narrator?

Author Bio

Barbara Esstman was born in Carroll, Iowa, and grew up in St. Charles, Missouri. Like her character Nora in **Night Ride Home**, Esstman broke off a relationship at age nineteen to a young man who went off to war. Decades after her former boyfriend returned from Vietnam, Esstman reconnected with him. Much of her character Ozzie--his love of horses, his battle scars, and his long silence--Esstman says she learned from his real-life model. The book's dedication, "To 'Naldo from Rosie," refers to this relationship. "The novel," says Esstman, "is true in the deepest sense, though Oz and Nora are invented out of air and exist on a farm that never was."

After graduating from St. Louis University, Esstman taught high school English. During the years that her three children were young, she left teaching and the family moved frequently. For the last 15 years, Esstman has lived outside

Washington, DC in Oakton, Virginia. Today she teaches occasionally but devotes most of her time to writing. Her three children come home often and fill the house with friends and pets.

Esstman's first novel, **The Other Anna**, was published in 1993 and was adapted for a television movie, *Secrets.*

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Publication Date: August 18, 1998
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Harper Perennial
ISBN-10: 006097754X
ISBN-13: 9780060977542