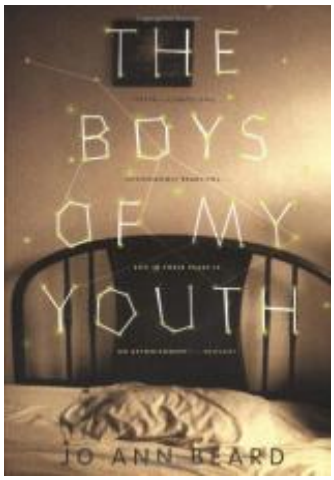
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The Boys of My Youth

by Jo Ann Beard



About the Book

Cousins, mothers, sisters, dolls, dogs, best friends: these are the fixed points in Jo Ann Beard's universe, the constants that remain when the boys of her youth-and the men who replace them-are gone. This widely praised collection of autobiographical essays summons back, with astonishing grace and power, moments of childhood epiphany as well as the cataclysms of adult life: betrayal, divorce, death. It is a book that heralds the arrival of an immensely gifted and original writer.

Discussion Guide

1. The thread that binds the stories is--despite the book's title--Beard's relationships with her female friends and relatives. Why do you think Beard called her book *The Boys of My Youth*?

2. Discuss the order of the stories. Did you like moving back and forth between Beard's adulthood and her childhood? How did it affect your reading of the childhood stories to know about Beard as an adult and vice versa?

3. How did you react to "Bulldozing the Baby," the story in which Beard's mother throws out her doll and then lies to Beard about it? Do you have similar childhood memories of knowing things that your parents didn't think you knew?

4. The publication in the *New Yorker* of the story "The Fourth State of Matter" marked a major turning point in Beard's career as a writer. She said in an interview: "It's painful to be a writer. . . . There's truly not room for everybody to make it -- all those writers working as secretaries. . . .The reason I made it is because I wrote a story with six murders it. . . . I haven't come to terms with that." Do you see evidence of Beard's ambivalence in the story itself?

5. "The Fourth State of Matter" was published in the *New Yorker's* special fiction issue, and many booksellers wanted to display *The Boys of My Youth* in the fiction section of their stores. What makes this book so much like fiction? How is it

different?

6. How would you feel if a member of your family wrote a memoir in which she told personal stories about you and the other members of your family? Should a writer be able to publish stories that portray family members in an unflattering light? What if a family disagrees with the author's version of her life story?

7. Is it acceptable for a writer to take creative license in writing an autobiographical story, particularly if the story describes events from the author's infancy or early childhood?

8. From the information in various stories, piece together a picture of Beard's marriage. Why does the aftermath of the marriage seem to be more important to the author than the marriage itself?

9. Animals figure prominently in many of Beard's stories. What does her relationship with animals say about her? What is the role they play in her life?

10. Many reviews of *The Boys of My Youth* focused not just on the quality of Beard's writing but also on the content of her stories, with reviewers offering their own interpretations of Beard's childhood. Is it fair for reviewers to comment critically on Beard's life, or should they focus only on her prose style and narrative skills?

Author Bio

Jo Ann Beard is the author of the groundbreaking collection of autobiographical essays, THE BOYS OF MY YOUTH, and the novels IN ZANESVILLE and FESTIVAL DAYS. Her work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Tin House*, *Best American Essays*, and other magazines and anthologies. She has received a Whiting Foundation Award and nonfiction fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the New York Foundation for the Arts. She teaches writing at Sarah Lawrence College.

Critical Praise

"Smart, funny, and moving....A gifted and gusty writer....this is what a first collection of stories should be. "

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