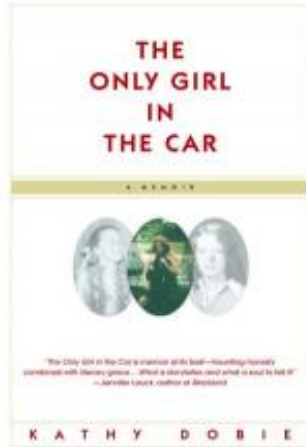


The Only Girl in the Car: A Memoir

by Kathy Dobie



About the Book

Bookworm and dreamer, Kathy was a young girl with a tender heart, an adventurer's spirit, and a child's terrible confusion about her proper place in the world. As the oldest daughter in a family of six children, she seemed trapped in her role as Big Sister and Mommy's Helper. Then, one day, teetering on the brink of adolescence, hormones surging, she heard someone call her "cheesecake," and suddenly saw her path.

"Cheesecake, jailbait, sex kitten"--the very words seemed to be "doors opening" to a splendid new self. But from the moment she decides to lose her virginity and reels in her prey, a "full-grown man," fourteen-year-old Kathy is headed for trouble. One cold, raw March night some months later, parked in a car with four boys on the outskirts of her small suburban town, she finds it.

Though she could never have foreseen the outcome of that night, the "boys in the car could just as well have been Gypsies foretelling my future," she writes. Girls who break the rules in small towns like the one she lived in are expected to pay a very high price for their transgressions--and she did.

And yet...this young girl, as scrappy a protagonist as any in our literature, manages to transform her fate. The story of how she came to be in that car, and how she stepped out of it forever altered, to be sure, yet not forever damaged, is the theme of this extraordinary coming-of-age tale.

Discussion Guide

1. One of the first characters Kathy Dobie introduces is Brian, the thirty-three-year-old she meets on her parents' front lawn. What are your first impressions of Brian and Kathy, based on this initial encounter? How did those impressions change throughout the book?

2. Though many of Kathy's experiences reflect the time period during which they occurred, her fantasies and impulses have several universal qualities. What outcomes would you predict for today's teenage Kathy Dobies?
3. Religious imagery frequently appears in this memoir. In what way does the author's attitude towards God vary from the time she maintains a secret "chapel drawer" to her concluding paragraphs about the Reverend Betty Neal?
4. When Kathy embarks on a mission to lose her virginity, what does "virginity" represent to her? Does the actual experience provide any of the benefits for which she had hoped?
5. Chapter eleven describes the ironic cross-country vacation that Kathy's parents think of as a wholesome family activity. Why do you suppose they were so unaware of Kathy's communication with leering passersby? Were you surprised by Mr. Dobie's lack of response when his co-worker called the snapshot of Kathy "cheesecake"?
6. What does Bill teach Kathy about their family's protocol regarding rebellion?
7. Does Catholicism lend a particular tone to Kathy's youth that other faiths might not have? Why? What are some examples?
8. Kathy's parents told her years later that they heard her sneaking out at night but, short of locking her in her room, "didn't know what to do" Do you agree with their actions? To which parent does Kathy seem more responsive?
9. Does the Teen Center provide a microcosm of Hamden? What drew Kathy to the Center? Why were the teenagers there so quick to judge her and exonerate Jimmy?
10. Discuss the experiences that formed your bridge from childhood to adulthood. How did your impulses compare to Kathy's? How has your own perception of the opposite sex evolved from the time you were a teenager?
11. Compare Kathy's relationship to Bill to that of her other siblings. Does her affection for him seem mutual?
12. Discuss the significance of the following line, which refers to a tan blonde who catches the gaze of Kathy's father: "I wanted to be her, collecting stares as I walked down the street, pulling fathers from their suitlike selves" What might the "suitlike self" mean to her? What were some of the other motivations behind her adolescent actions?
13. Kathy mentions her mother's dinner-table proclamations against feminists. "Stephen wouldn't have understood her agitation?. The rest of us had begun to harden our hearts against her. We had to, for she had set all her hopes and dreams, her sense of worth, on the idea of a big, happy, loving family. And we were going to crush her dream" What makes Kathy so certain that she and her siblings would never live up to Mrs. Dobie's ideal?
14. What did Kathy's parents demonstrate to her about gender and power?
15. In your opinion, does Kathy's horrific experience with Jimmy and his cohorts constitute rape? Do you believe that her friends would have been more sympathetic if the incident had happened in the twenty-first century?

16. In the face of Kathy's ostracism, Cindy becomes a surprising source of unconditional support. How does this turn of events shape Kathy's depiction of her family?

17. What are the challenges and benefits of growing up in a large family? What do the final chapters of **The Only Girl in the Car** indicate about Kathy's attitudes toward life in groups?

18. How do Kathy's images of New York compare to her depictions of Hamden and New Haven?

19. Do you consider Kathy's writing of this memoir, albeit with pseudonyms, to be a risky act?

Author Bio

Kathy Dobie's work has appeared in many publications, including *Harper's*, *The Village Voice*, *Vibe*, and *Salon*. Raised in Hamden, Connecticut, she now lives in Brooklyn, New York. **The Only Girl in the Car** is her first book.

Critical Praise

"**The Only Girl in the Car** is at once as comfortable as a dear friend and as terrifying as a dear friend's darkest secret. Open and honest and dignified, this is the memoir, often funny, always intelligent, of an era, of a family, but, most of all, of a remarkable and resilient girl's intimacy with her own mistakes."

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