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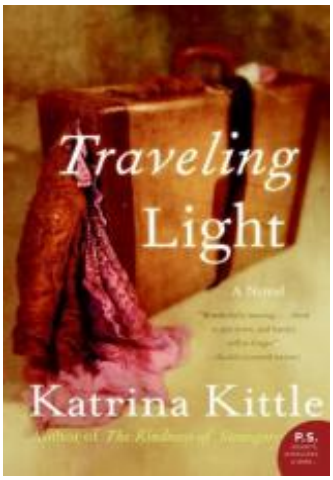
Traveling Light

by Katrina Kittle



About the Book

"Travel light and you can sing in the robber's face" was the best advice Summer Zwolenick ever received from her father, though she didn't recognize it at the time. Three years after the accident that ended her career as a ballerina, she is back in the familiar suburbs of Dayton, Ohio, teaching at a local high school. But it wasn't nostalgia that called Summer home. It was her need to spend quality time with her brother, Todd, and his devoted partner, Jacob. Todd, the golden athlete whose strength and spirit encouraged Summer to nurture her own unique talents and follow her dream, is in the final stages of a terminal illness. In a few short months, he will be dead?leaving Summer only a handful of precious days to learn all the lessons her brother still has to teach her . . . from how to love and how to live to how to let go.

Traveling Light is the deeply moving debut novel from Katrina Kittle, the acclaimed author of **The Kindness of Strangers**?an unforgettable story of love, bonds, and promises that

Discussion Guide

1. What does the title mean? When Todd places "Travel light" on his list of things to do, what does he mean?

2. Which characters succeed in traveling light? How does the success or failure to "travel light" affect Abby? Grandma Anna? Denny? Zack? The parents? Nicholas? Summer? Todd? Jacob?

3. How does the manner in which Todd contracts HIV tie into the theme of traveling light?

4. Does Summer keep her promise to her brother? Does she change her view of what a successful keeping of that promise entails?

5. Compare and contrast the relationship of Summer and Nicholas to that of Jacob and Todd. How does the parents'

relationship compare? What about Abby and Brad's relationship?

6. Compare and contrast Summer's feelings and attitudes about dance and teaching. Do those feelings and attitudes change over the course of the novel?

7. Todd sends Summer a postcard saying "Be kind for everyone we meet is fighting a hard battle," referring to Grandma Anna. What is Grandma Anna's battle? How does Summer's growing understanding of Grandma Anna's battle parallel her own understanding of Denny Robillard? What is Denny's battle? What is Summer's battle in dealing with Denny?

8. What is the responsibility of a teacher to teach tolerance in public schools? Is Summer a good teacher? Is she out of line with what she tries to accomplish with Denny? With Zack?

9. What is the significance of Chaos, the mare? What does Summer learn, or gain, from her?

10. What is the definition of family? What sense of family do the various characters in *Traveling Light* possess? Relationships to consider: Arnicia with Todd and Jacob; Jacob and Todd versus Jacob's parents; Summer and Todd versus their parents; Todd and Grandma Anna; Aunt Marnee with everyone.

At one point, Jacob refers to Arnicia as "family." Do you agree? Jacob's loyalties to his family unit with Todd are stronger than those to his own parents. Summer and Todd, however, remain close to their parents, even though their parents have failed them in many ways. Where do relatives like Grandma Anna, or Aunt Marnee, tie into your definition? Did you sympathize with Todd's mother, having to live with Anna, knowing how Anna felt about Todd?

11. Todd sends Nicholas the Rilke quote, "For one human being to love another; that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but a preparation." What do you think? Is there more difficult work that any character faces in this novel? Is Todd facing death a more difficult task?

12. What is the significance of the closing line of the novel?

13. How did you feel about AIDS before you began reading this book? How do you feel after reading it? Did any of your own views change? Which do you think would be a more difficult struggle?the physical pain and illness, or the social stigma still attached to AIDS?

Author Bio

Katrina Kittle has lived in the Dayton, Ohio, area for most of her life. She grew up in a home where books were prized possessions, and original stories and poems were given as gifts. Her father is a voracious "chain reader," who encouraged her to read widely, and still greets her at the door with, "Did you bring me any books?" Her childhood was full of horses and books and hiking in the woods and camping with Girl Scouts and bossing the neighborhood kids into huge theatrical productions.

Originally interested in dance and theater, Kittle studied at the North Carolina School of the Arts and Ohio University,

first as a theater major, then accepting an invitation to join the Honors Tutorial Program in English. She had a double major in English and education, worked in the theater costume shop, rode on the university?s equestrian team, kept a Theater minor, and graduated in 1990 with a BA in English and a BS in Education, earning the honor of Outstanding Graduating Senior for both departments.

After graduating, Kittle taught high school Advanced Placement British Literature for five years, then spent several years freelancing as a children?s theater director and creative writing instructor. She has worked as a writer-in-residence and taught creative writing workshops for several elementary, middle, and high schools, universities, and organizations. She has taught students as young as third grade and has had an 80-year-old student in her Fiction Intensive at The Antioch Writers? Workshop.

During "the freelance years," Kittle also worked in case management support at the AIDS Foundation Miami Valley (now the AIDS Resource Center), cleaned houses (which she found "very Zen-like and perfect for the writing life: you get left alone with your hands busy doing mindless work while your brain can simmer story ideas"), and worked as a veterinary assistant.

Kittle then taught 6th- and 7th-grade English at the Miami Valley School in Dayton, where she directed a middle school play each year. If she were to remain teaching, she would wish to be nowhere else, but she is so grateful to be fulfilling a lifelong dream to write full-time.

She is the author of *Traveling Light* and *Two Truths and a Lie*. Her third novel, *The Kindness of Strangers*, was released in February 2006. Early chapters from this third novel earned Katrina grants from the Ohio Arts Council and from the Montgomery County Arts and Cultural District. *The Kindness of Strangers* was selected as a Book Sense pick for February, and was the Fiction Book winner for the 2006 Great Lakes Book Awards.

Kittle runs and studies Latin dance. She's also on a cooking spree (when she's "cooking" figuratively on a new book, she's usually cooking a lot literally, too). In addition to her favorite pesto, she's especially fond of a recent espresso-chocolate cake she discovered in Nigella Lawson's fabulous cookbook *Feast*. She is also dabbling in Indian cooking, and so far her friends are willing guinea pigs.

With her purchase of a house in June 2009, Kittle has become obsessed with gardening. She tilled garden beds and planted seedlings before she unpacked a single box *inside* the house. With the gardening came new cooking challenges --- how to preserve the harvest? She is determined to learn to can before next fall's garden bounty.

Kittle loves theater and tries to get her theater "fix" at least once a year, usually auditioning for something at the Dayton Theatre Guild.

She also loves to travel. Recent travel highlights include spending the night with a goat under her bed in Ghana; riding horseback through the hills of Sintra, Portugal; and floating on her back in the Mediterranean looking up at the cliff-cut city of Positano, Italy.

Katrina Kittle keeps Dayton, Ohio, as her home base, where she is the proud aunt of Amy and Nathan, and where she

lives with her assistant, Joey the cat.

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