



The Center of Winter

By Marya Hornbacher
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Introduction

At the center of winter, in Motley, Minnesota, Arnold Schiller gives in to the oppressive season that reigns outside and also to his own inner demons -- he commits suicide, leaving a devastated family in his wake.

Claire Schiller, wife and mother, must emerge from her grief and help her two young children to recover. Twelve-year-old Esau is haunted by the same darkness that plagued his father. Already he has been in and out of psychiatric hospitals, and now he must overcome the forces that drive him deep into himself. Six-year-old Katie tries to help her mother hold the family together but has to come to terms with the memory of her father, who was at once loving and cruel.

Narrated alternately by Claire, Katie, and Esau, this powerful novel explores the ways in which both children and adults experience tragic events, discover solace and hope in one another, and survive.

Questions for Discussion

1. How would you describe the state of Arnold and Claire Schiller's marriage, and what clues hint at the true nature of their feelings for each other?
2. How does Arnold's suicide affect each member of the Schiller family, and to what extent does his decision to kill himself seem connected to his alcohol abuse?
3. When Kate remarks of her hometown of Motley, Minnesota: "The town was gone long before my time," what does she mean, and how does her comment relate to the 1970s milieu of *The Center of Winter*?
4. "At a certain point in winter, there is a slow-growing feeling that it has just begun and it will never end and there is no way to escape it." What roles do weather and the seasons play in *The Center of Winter*, and how do they connect to the emotional experiences the novel's characters undergo?
5. How are the themes of friendship and compassion explored in the relationships between Donna and Claire and Davey and Kate?
6. How would you describe Esau's mental illness, and how does it compare to the depression and psychological difficulties experienced by his father, Arnold, and Davey's father, Dale?
7. Why is Claire resistant to what Frank has to offer her, and what role do her children play in that resistance?
8. What explains Esau and Kate's unique connection as brother and sister, and how does each sustain the other emotionally?
9. Of the novel's three narrators -- Claire, Esau, and Katie -- which did you find especially persuasive or appealing, and why?
10. What message do you think the author was trying to make in ending the novel with the revelation of Kate's marriage to Davey?

About the Author

Marya Hornbacher is a journalist as well as a writer of fiction and memoir. Her first book, *Wasted: A Memoir of Anorexia and Bulimia*, has become a classic. *The Center of Winter* is her first novel. She lives in Minneapolis.