

Girl in the Woods

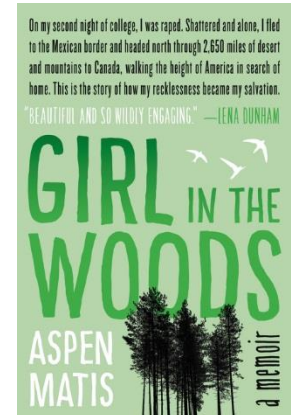
William Morrow

By Aspen Matis

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Introduction

Girl in the Woods is Aspen Matis's exhilarating true-life adventure of hiking from Mexico to Canada—a coming of age story, a survival story, and a triumphant story of overcoming emotional devastation. On her second night of college, Aspen was raped by a fellow student. Overprotected by her parents who discouraged her from telling of the attack, Aspen was confused and ashamed. Dealing with a problem that has sadly become all too common on college campuses around the country, she stumbled through her first semester—a challenging time made even harder by the coldness of her college's "conflict mediation" process. Her desperation growing, she made a bold decision: She would seek healing in the freedom of the wild, on the 2,650-mile Pacific Crest Trail leading from Mexico to Canada.



Questions for Discussion

1. Why is Aspen's call to the RAINN hotline, and the responder's reassurance that the rape was not her fault, such a major moment of catharsis for her? How was Aspen hurt by the assumptions of other people that she must be somehow to blame for her rape? Why are people often so quick to blame the victim when it comes to this particular crime?
2. "I wanted to strip these boys of the power they tried to claim with smug eyes watching, assessing, deciding. Deciding rape was my fault, my shame." How does Aspen learn to reclaim her body in the aftermath of her rape? How does this shift affect her self-esteem and the way she sees herself?
3. "I sensed that I couldn't go home and go forward. At home, I would be trapped as helpless Debby Parker." Why does returning home and being surrounded by people with preconceived notions of you make it so difficult to redefine yourself? How does Aspen learn to free herself from these preconceived notions and gain a stronger sense of self?
4. What role does writing play in helping Aspen come to terms with her rape and become more self-confident? How does she relate finding her voice to finding her strength?
5. "And for the first time in my young life, I saw how someone I once believed I'd known could be so different from who I thought he was – and the huge magnitude to which a relationship could change." After this first realization about Never-Never, how does

Aspen begin to see people differently? Who else does she start to see in a different light, and what other relationships does she notice shifting?

6. Aspen's brother calls her walk "self-indulgent," and wants her to do something to help people instead. Can something that is vital for our happiness and emotional well-being really be considered self-indulgent? How is Aspen helping people just by writing this book? Why is it so important for people who have overcome hardships to share their stories?
7. "He was human and not only just my father." How does Aspen's perspective of her father change throughout the book? What new information does she learn about him that leads her to change her view? How does their relationship evolve, and how is this affected by her shifting perception of him?
8. Does writing the letter to her family help Aspen even though she never mails it? Is explaining her rape to others really the most important thing for her, or is it more about coming to terms with it herself? Do you think she needs to accept it herself before talking about it with other people?
9. "Physically I'd become undeniably confident and capable – but physical weakness had never been the problem that I had. My true problem had been passivity, the lifelong conditioned submission that became my nature." Are physical and emotional strength disconnected from each other, or does becoming strong physically create feelings of emotional and mental strength? Does Aspen's newfound physical strength play a role in helping her overcome her passivity?
10. "Walking in solitude fixes nothing, but it leads you to the place where you can identify the malady – see the wound's true form and nature – and then discern the proper medicine." How does her time on the PCT teach Aspen to understand herself and her life more clearly? Why is it important to identify and fully understand your problems before you can fix them?
11. "I was the director of my life, it was already true, and I would soon lead myself to my dreamed-of destinations." What aspects of her experience help Aspen gain this sense of control over her life? How does this make her gain confidence about her future and in her decision to become a writer?
12. "She'd taken care of me in all the ways my body needed, but the devastation of my rape had made me feel the weight of the essential way she had neglected me: she hadn't nurtured the potential of my strong and healthy *independence*." Do overprotective parents actually end up hurting their children by preventing them from becoming independent? How was Aspen affected by her mother's protectiveness?