



Reading Group Gold

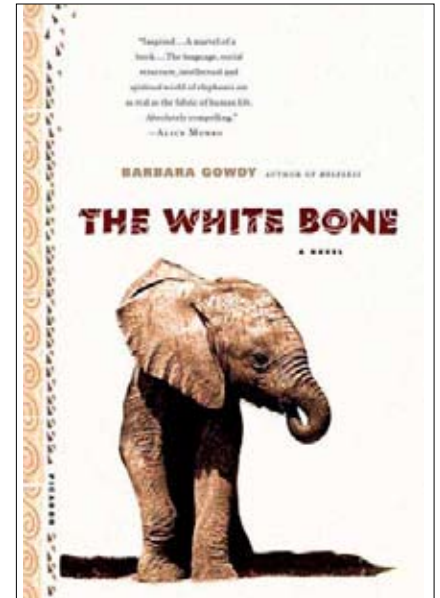
The White Bone

A Novel

by Barbara Gowdy

About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *The White Bone* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *The White Bone*.



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About the Book

A tour de force of the imagination, *The White Bone* is a thrilling journey into the minds of African elephants as they struggle to survive in a land wracked by drought and slaughter. The story is told by a young cow named Mud, who at the novel's opening has survived an attack on her family by ivory poachers. She finds herself at the center of a desperate quest for *The White Bone*: an object of mythic power that if found might lead the herd to safety and survival.

“Inspired . . . a marvel of a book . . . the language, social structure, intellectual and spiritual world of elephants are as real as the fabric of human life. Absolutely compelling.” —Alice Munro

“A hunt and chase story of growing narrative momentum. I was simply swept up in it. I love it. It reminded me of nothing.” —John Irving

“A spectacular achievement.” —*Chicago Tribune*

“Dazzling ... Gowdy manages genuinely to entrench us in the elephant psyche ... [And] renders this arid African landscape with a subtle gorgeousness reminiscent of Isak Dinesen.” —*The Boston Globe*

“Brilliant . . . Gowdy’s elephants are astonishingly embodied, their world made up of vivid sensory particulars and depicted with precise naturalistic realism . . . The pathos of their condition, its recognizability, is, in the end, the book’s most lasting effect.” —Nick LoLordo, *The Boston Book Review*



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About the Author

Barbara Gowdy is the author of five previous books, including *Mister Sandman*, *We So Seldom Look on Love*, and *Falling Angels*, all of which have met with widespread international acclaim and critical praise. Twice a finalist for both of Canada's most prestigious literary honors, the Governor General's Award and the Giller Prize, Gowdy has previously worked as a book editor, teacher and critic. Born in Windsor, Ontario, she now lives in Toronto.

Discussion Questions

1. When Date Bed is separated from her family, she discovers that the Domain has been warped by the violence of man. Because these are "abnormal times," she's not quite certain of animals' behaviors anymore. It's clear that the arrival of man not only alters the elephants' world, but the animal kingdom at large. In what ways are each of the character's perspectives altered, both through direct circumstance and spiritually?
2. In what ways do the elephants' religion parallel and differ from the varieties of human worship?
3. Standing amidst the slaughter of his family, Hail Stones says to Mud, "Only in moments of bliss does it become apparent to us why terrible things happen." (p.117) What does the young bull mean by this statement? If Mud cannot yet understand the statement, does she by the end of the novel?
4. On p. 121: "Twice [She-Snorts] located Date Bed's dung and twice she smelled single drops of her blood. At the first discovery of blood, on the node of a log, She-Snorts said, 'She is wounded,' and She-Soothes bellowed, 'Hardly at all!' and their voices, one frightened, one encouraged, described the precise, contracted boundaries of what could be reasonably felt. Not despairing, not yet. Not relieved yet, either." How do these opposite sentiments resonate throughout the novel at large? Where would you say Mud stands between such opinions?
5. At the opening of Chapter Ten (p. 159), the author describes the elephants' sense of time. What role does memory play in such measurements, and what do the elephants' perceptions say about how they view themselves?
6. When left to her own devices, how does Date Bed improvise her own measurements of time? And reflectively, how does her memory change?
7. Toward the end of Mud's pregnancy, she experiences a dream of Date Bed telling her, "You must understand, we aren't what we think we are." Date Bed's trunk then disappears, and out of the cavity a wind blows and a baby cries, "Mama!" What do you think this vision means to Mud? What are her feelings about her own child?
8. When Date Bed finds the Thing, she begins what could be described as a self-exploration. Her journey



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begins to increasingly turn inward. Through the exercises that she uses to recover lost memory, what does Date Bed find?

9. “By what misguided arrangement were she-ones made swollen with memory rather than sleek with appetite?” (p. 320) Discuss the relevancy of this statement, not only at the close of the book, but throughout the entire novel.

10. Through Mud’s eyes, who is Bolt?