



A  
Reading  
Group  
Guide

1. In *The Boy in the Moon*, Ian Brown describes the many effects the birth of his disabled son Walker had on the life of their family. In what ways did Walker change the lives of Brown, his wife Johanna, and their daughter Hayley?
2. One of Brown's most main emotions throughout the book is guilt. Why does he feel so guilty, especially if Walker's problems are caused by a random genetic mutation? Does the fact that Walker was kept alive by new medical technologies change Brown's responsibilities as a father? He admits that he sometimes thought of committing suicide, and of taking Walker with him. Can you understand his reasoning? What stopped him, in your opinion?
3. Brown claims that while he has no concrete proof, he suspects Walker has an inner life, complete with aspirations, desires, urges and even a point of view, albeit an unconventional one. What does he present as evidence for this inner life? Did you find it convincing?
4. What, if anything, is the value of Walker's "broken life"? What is the value of believing that Walker has an inner, personal life?
5. Thanks to pre-natal testing, Brown points out, a woman can now know early in her pregnancy, thanks to a simple blood test, whether her fetus will be born with any number of serious and debilitating genetic afflictions. Some experts believe Down Syndrome will be a thing of the past by 2030. Would that be a good development? Would it be a good development for people with Down Syndrome? After reading *The Boy in the Moon*, what are the reasons for aborting a genetically afflicted child? What, according to the book, are the reasons against aborting a disabled fetus?
6. Would such tests still be desirable if we took better care of the disabled? Brown claims that his wife Johanna, Walker's mother, is unlike most mothers of disabled children because she says she would have changed Walker if she could have, for the most average child? For whose sake would she have changed him? What would you have done in her circumstances?



7. In the course of the book, Walker's mother, Johanna, visits a native shaman to find out what the shaman can tell her about Walker's future and purpose. Describe the shaman's vision, and how it relates to Walker's life. Why does Walker want to see his own reflection in the well? What does his reflection represent? Johanna believes that the native vision of Walker's life is the most humane one she has ever heard. Why? How would our view of the intellectually disabled be different if we saw them through the eyes of the shaman?
8. Charles Darwin believed that the human capacity for speech and empathy may have evolved from our comparative fragility, and not from our being fittest of all the animals. Has Walker's fragility bestowed any evolutionary benefit on us? Is fragility the same as weakness? Brown claims that Walker has helped him far more than Brown has been able to help Walker. What does he mean? What is the value, if any, of imperfection?
9. Jean Vanier, the founder of L'Arche, a system of communities for the disabled, was a successful professor when he gave up his job to start L'Arche. Why do you think he did it? What do you think he hoped to find? How do communities like L'Arche differ from group homes?
10. Throughout *The Boy in the Moon*, Brown values his physical togetherness with Walker at least as much as he values their emotional or intellectual togetherness. But are they really that different? Does Ian Brown "know" his disabled, non-talking 15-year-old son as well as another father can know his normal 15-year-old teenagers? Is there anything you envy about Walker's life?
11. Brown claims at one point to be surprised when a geneticist refers to Walker's future wife. Why? Were you surprised? Do you automatically think, as Brown admits he sometimes does, that marriage is out of the question for Walker? Why do we resist the idea that the disabled have normal desires?



12. Brown says we tend to ignore the disabled, or sweep them out of sight, because we are afraid of them. Why? What do the disabled represent? He also says they expect much less from us than we think we owe them. Why is that?
13. Brown claims that Walker's care, which requires 24 hour supervision, costs \$200,000 a year. In Canada, most of that is paid for by the government and therefore via everyone's taxes. Do you think that's fair to people who don't have disabled children? Walker would have died if nature had taken its course, but was instead kept alive by sophisticated new medical technologies. Does the growing presence of this new kind of person change your opinion of how much responsibility a society has to look after its disabled?
14. At one point in *The Boy in the Moon*, Brown says that disability is always against the status quo, always radical, always anti-establishment. How so? Do you agree?
15. Walker Brown is seriously disabled, intellectually and physically; his father, the writer, is not. Neither are most of the people who buy *The Boy in the Moon*. How do you think you would react to the book if you were disabled? Do you have to be disabled, or the relative of a disabled person, to appreciate the book? In what ways is it a universal story?

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