

Reading Group Guide

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Poster Child*, Emily Rapp's poignant memoir of growing up with a congenital birth defect, and her struggle to accept her body and tell her story.

About this book

Emily Rapp became a poster child for the March of Dimes at age six. Proudly showing off her wooden leg to reporters and inspired audiences, she would announce to the crowd: "I might have one leg, but I am not disabled" (55). Born with PFFD (proximal focal femoral deficiency), which required her left leg to be amputated at age four, Rapp can barely remember life before frightening operations and ever-changing prostheses. Rapp transformed herself into a "Supergirl," compensating for her leg through feats of bravery, academic accomplishment, and self-discipline. When Rapp pushed herself to teach in South Korea as a Fulbright scholar, her tenuous control crumbled under self-imposed pressures. For Rapp, true bravery involves looking within, discovering the unique identity beneath her fearless façade, and sharing her story.

For discussion

1. Discuss the paradox, "Being extraordinary was the only way to be ordinary" (205), that ruled Rapp's life until young adulthood. How did Rapp's conference of disabled women, held at the Lutheran World Federation in Geneva, help her temper her drive for extraordinariness? What truths did Rapp finally admit at this conference?
2. Consider the events of Rapp's first Communion. How did the parable of the mustard seed, which appears on page 86, lead Rapp to challenge her faith?
3. How did the experience of becoming the March of Dimes poster child affect Rapp at age six? How does her experience as a poster child carry over into adulthood?
4. Rapp writes, "The body has a remarkable ability to displace pain. First it's in the abstract, then it's in your skin as a feeling, before it moves to your mind as a story, but sooner or later the pain ends up in your heart. And that's where it stays" (127). Relate this account of pain to the life stages that Rapp narrates in her memoir.
5. Rapp recalls thinking of her first wooden leg, "The leg felt like a part of me, like an extension of my flesh-and-blood-stump; it *was* me" (48). How does Rapp's attitude toward her prosthesis change over time? How does she feel about the old collection of outgrown prostheses she discovered in her parents' garage?
6. Before Rapp's grandmother learned of her newborn granddaughter's birth defect, she boasted, "Gorgeous baby girl, the prettiest anyone has ever seen" (9). Consider the gender difference between males and females with congenital birth defects. How might Rapp's life have been different if she had been born male? What if she had been born into another culture and another country, such as South Korea?

7. Rapp discovered skiing in the winter of 1981. How did she earn the nickname “Supergirl” (76) from her ski instructor? How did she try to live up to that nickname, both on and off the slopes?
8. Discuss Rapp’s complicated relationship with her South Korean students. How did she react to the girls’ self-imposed “code of sameness” (185)? How did her lonely nights of tae kwon do in the school gymnasium make Rapp feel closer to her students?
9. Rapp experienced debilitating panic attacks in South Korea, which Dr. Pavlovich diagnosed as post-traumatic stress disorder. Why did Rapp feel “for the first time in my life, purely disabled” (197) that night after her diagnosis? What does “disabled” mean, in this sense?
10. Rapp learned from her doctor that her disability “had belonged to me all along; there was no overcoming my DNA. I could not argue with the realities of creation” (225). Why was this discovery a relief to Rapp? How does this resolve the question she posed earlier in the book, “Blame... To whom or what does it belong?” (10)

Suggested reading

Lucy Grealy, *Autobiography of a Face*; Nancy Eiland, *The Disabled God*; Susan Brown, Nancy Stern, and Debra Connors, *With the Power of Each Breath: A Disabled Women’s Anthology*; Alison Smith, *Name All the Animals*; Lee Montgomery, *The Things Between Us*; Simi Linton, *My Body Politic*; Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*; Elizabeth Gilbert, *Eat, Pray, Love*.