

THE ROWING LESSON

Reader's Guide

1. Discuss the significance of the title. Who is the teacher and who is the student and is it really rowing that is being taught?
2. "The Rowing Lesson" has been described as an elegy, which is a poem of mourning or a reflection on the death of someone. Would you describe "The Rowing Lesson" that way? Do you think this is why it is written in the second person?
3. In the novel, Harry Klein is referred to by one of his patients as "Dr. God." Why do you think she refers to him that way? Does he seem godlike to you? Would you like him to be your doctor?
4. Unlike her father, her brother and her uncles, Betsy Klein has opted to be an artist, not a doctor or a scientist. In an early chapter, she describes Harry, her father, visiting her studio in New York City and his disappointing response to her paintings of extinct animals. Why do you think he responds that way? Do you think her choice of subject-matter has any particular relevance to the story?
5. Much of the novel takes place in World War II South Africa and Harry Klein's father dies within hours of the German invasion of Poland. How do both these events shape his character? What does it mean to him that he is both South African and Jewish?
6. The South African government, by a narrow vote in parliament, supported Great Britain and not Nazi Germany in World War II and many South Africans enlisted and fought for the Allies. What would have happened to Harry Klein and his family if it had gone the other way, with the South African government on the side of Nazi Germany? Also, why doesn't Harry enlist, and how does this effect him?
7. Harry meets red-haired, freckled Stella Sacks while he is doing his medical residency. A friend dares him to take her on a date, and find out if she has freckles all over. Thus begins their courtship, which leads to marriage. How would you describe their marriage? What keeps them together?

8. Harry Klein takes four trips up the Touw River to its source, an area named Ebb 'n Flow. Discuss what is different and what is similar about each excursion.
9. Betsy Klein is not only Harry's daughter, she is also his patient. Discuss the intertwining of those two relationships as they are explored in the book.
10. At the end, Harry goes up the Touw River again, this time ostensibly by himself. Who does he meet at Ebb 'n Flow, and what really happens up there?