

On the Way to the End of the World

Reader's Guide

1. The Kennedy Walk, the Big Walk, was meant as a shared patriotic endeavor, one that would give heart to a nation unnerved by a close encounter with nuclear terror. The Walk arose from JFK's desire to encourage faith in the United States' abilities – in American resilience – and also to promote physical fitness, a necessary foundation, JFK believed, for intellectual as well as physical strength.

In our time, fewer people see themselves as part of a shared national character, and patriotism has taken on a more charged role, claimed and defined differently by opposing camps. Can you imagine a scenario that would bring socially/politically disparate groups together for a shared challenge, one that would celebrate a sense of integrity, belief in community, and, too, the unique values the United States presented to the world after the Second World War? What might such an event or challenge look like today? Would you take part?

2. Secrets play a big part in several characters' decisions to go on Humtown's Kennedy Walk. Secrets also compel others to pursue the walkers. Few of these secrets fully emerge into the open, but some of the walkers (like Landon) seem to know them all. Other intuit without openly interrogating. Still others (like the Scouts and Warren) slowly realize that secrets they don't know, perhaps shouldn't know, exist, and they act to protect their fellow walkers without questioning.

What would you do if you were among a group of acquaintances or strangers and you gradually began to understand some were carrying painful secrets? Would you inquire outright? If you were the one carrying the terrible secret, what would compel you to reveal it?

3. Speaking of secrets: As Humtown's main telephone operator on the party line, Helen Hubka has access to private information *and* rumors and innuendos. Despite her confidence in her own abilities, she rarely discerns between truth and gossip as she distributes "news." Not everyone buys into Helen Hubka's versions. Caroline, for one, is ever-suspicious. And, as Caroline notes, the stories Helen Hubka circulates can do lasting damage, however well-meaning that woman's motives might be.

Dial-up no longer exists today, of course, but that gray area between truth and outright fabrication has only grown larger via accepted, even trusted, news sources. How do you discern truth from assumption? Do you automatically accept information when it comes from a person or publication you trust? Does that change your behavior towards people around you? What would cause you to question and how would that affect you?

Have you yourself or someone you cared for ever been the subject of unfounded gossip?

4. The priest or not-priest continually confounds the other characters, yet he provides a lightness to their group with his songs, as well as a surprising hardiness. Most importantly, he reads Avis's dilemma early on and comes to her rescue when Teddy appears. Do you think his actions are accidental and self-serving? Or worldly wise? Kind? Or some combination of any of those? Who do you think the priest might be? And why might he be on this walk? Where is he really headed?
5. As in the movie "The Wizard of Oz," several of the novel's characters find or reveal hidden abilities. Seems they had these abilities all along, but were able to acknowledge or use them only given the support and kindness of new-found friends. For instance, although deeply immured in Teddy's dramas and controlled by the physical and psychological threats he makes against her, Avis has found at least one way of converting her weakened position into a superpower: she's learned how to become invisible. And that talent is put to good use when the walkers are threatened. Even the walkers' shared more mundane talent of resilience may not be simply about having inner strength but finding it together.

Have you ever found yourself engaged in a challenging activity with people you didn't know well? Did your perceptions of those people change as time went on? Did you find qualities within yourself that surprised you?

6. Teddy is a horror to Avis, who has spent her childhood as his victim and his enabler. He's also not going anywhere. What do you think will happen when Avis returns to Humtown with Caroline and the rest of the walkers?
7. The walk is arduous, but along the way, the walkers experience moments of wonder and grace. They also become aware invisible forces are at play: the weather within them, the passing of time, the soul, to name a few. In your own experience, how do you see similar forces affecting your own adventures, if at all? And if they have, can you imagine scenarios in which recognizing the power of those unseen elements enhanced or derailed expectations or even changed the course of events?
8. *On the Way to the End of the World* is set in a fictional landscape that bears some resemblance to 1963 Port Townsend and the Olympic Peninsula. The End of the World, that cliffside spot well-known to Port Townsend locals, has been plucked out of town and placed at the end of the 50-mile trek. If you were plotting the course of your own dream Kennedy Walk in a real or imagined landscape, where would it begin and end? What landmarks might you include? Why?
9. Remy and Teddy and, to some extent, Karin, all act out of pure self-serving meanness, it seems. Lesser acts of villainy pervade through Humtown, as well. Little Halde's father (the Shuffler) and the boat-stealing Cravens are clearly engaged in illegal acts. The sheriff and Warren's father and the community as a whole, in turning a blind eye to family violence, petty larceny, and bullying, might also be seen as falling on the wrong

side of justice. In Humtown during this period, averting one's eyes to distasteful behavior might be seen as mannerly, but, of course, that allows bad behavior to continue, even intensify. At the same time, real goodness abounds. Caroline's Jay and Jaspar Goode are left to right wrongs and rescue, even if that means they must act in secret and put themselves in danger.

How would you act if you became aware of illegal or violent acts among your neighbors? What would you risk to do the right thing?

10. Grief is a monstrous state, riven with despair but also sometimes stung with outrageous decisions – to quickly pull up stakes and move house, for instance, or, conversely, to batten down the hatches and become hermit-like. Caroline's decision and her motive for going on the Big Walk seem both extreme and completely understandable. How (or why) do you think the walk changed her (if it did)? Do you think she'll still be planning another exit once she's back home in Humtown? Why or why not?
11. It's been said that only two kinds of stories underlie any narrative: *A man goes on a journey* or *A stranger comes to town*. While it seems obvious that the story of the walkers in *On the Way to the End of the World* skew to the first iteration, might you make a case for the second? Or for both in the same narrative?