



Things I Didn't Do: A Novel

by Karin Anderson

Discussion Questions

1. The story shows examples of the effects of adoption on the various characters over the decades. Do you think these depictions are realistic? Are they what you would have expected, or would you choose different scenarios?
2. Sami has a strong reaction to the name of the mule, Kit Carson (p. 37). Were you aware of Kit Carson's history with the Navajo people (<https://www.cbsnews.com/news>)? How was the history and experience of Native Americans taught when you were in school?
3. Kent says that in one way, the night of Ryder's accident is a good memory for him because it is the closest they ever came to being a functional family (p. 46). How do you feel about Kent's reaction? Do you agree that horrible events can also have some good that comes with the event?
4. Kent told Ryder that the difference between people does not come from whether or not they went to college but that "the difference is people who stop thinking and start shouting, versus people trying to hear better stories" (p. 210). What difference do you think Kent is trying to explain? What kinds of stories might be better stories? Is education related to being able to hear better stories? How can we be more prone to hearing better stories?
5. Alma tells Ryder, "Once you're in a predicament, you don't call it a mistake. You call it your life and you rise to it" (p. 258). Does choosing not to call something a mistake mean you can't think you did anything wrong? What does it mean to rise to your life?
6. Sami says that "most of our lives are made up of things we didn't choose" (p. 323). Do you agree? Would you choose to be more in control of the things that happen in your life?
7. Over the years, there have been many ways of referring to the first families of adopted children, including real parents, biological parents, and birth parents. Evaleen calls them Ryder's "first people" (p. 344). What are the connotations of the various terms? Do these terms reveal anything about our assumptions about various methods of family formation or the value of different types of families?

8. Many of the families in the novel are deeply troubled. At the same time, it's clear that Kent is correct in saying to Ryder that he didn't "know anyone [who] had it better than you, parent-wise" and that Ryder himself had become a good dad (p. 327). What makes the difference in being able to be strong families and good parents? What support can and should society and individuals give to families? How can we help both parents and children who struggle?

Activity Ideas

1. Check out the Native Places Atlas, an interactive map that "prioritizes the Indigenous names of geographic features and cultural sites."
<https://awc.utah.edu/projects/nativeplaces.php>
2. November is Native American Heritage Month. Participate in some of the celebrations.
<https://www.bia.gov/NNAHM>
<https://artsandculture.google.com/story/10-ways-to-celebrate-native-american-heritage-month/GAUhe-CUIT6IPQ?hl=en>
3. Family and heritage are important themes in the book. There are many ways to collect and share information about your family. These pages offer ideas.
<https://www.archives.gov/education/family-history>
<https://familytreemagazine.com/kids-genealogy/>
4. It is not surprising that Kent became a geologist given the fascination and knowledge his family have for the geology of their land. Learn something about the geology of your area. Look up the government geology department for your state. Do they suggest local activities or sites to visit? Visit the library to check out books such as the Roadside Geology book for your state.