

BACK BAY · READERS' PICK

Reading Group Guide

# In Zanesville

A novel by

Jo Ann Beard

## A conversation with Jo Ann Beard

When it was published in 1997, Jo Ann Beard's debut essay collection, *The Boys of My Youth*, indelibly altered the nonfiction landscape, earning her a Whiting Award and cult status as one of the new pioneers of creative nonfiction. Like Junot Diaz's *Drown* on the fiction side of the nineties, Beard's autobiographical sketches comprised a darkly comic and jarringly lucid collage of a life as intimately mundane as it is universally terror-stricken. Now, a decade later, Beard's long-awaited follow-up and debut novel, *In Zanesville*, excavates the emotional terrain of Nowheresville teendom with stunning wit, cutthroat clarity, and a profound empathy for the rigors of adolescence.

*In what ways did your process change from writing shorter non-fiction essays to approaching a fictional novel?*

Writing fiction really freed me up. The level of worry and stewing over fact—I was free from that. Whether it's fiction or nonfiction, underneath the surface it's always the same thing: it's just you and your imagination. I like that. I liked *In Zanesville's* main characters too, the two girls, even though they're idiots. I thought: I understand these girls. I understand why they

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behave the way they do. But the process—of imagining something until it feels like a memory—remained exactly the same.

*Are there any writing rituals you follow?*

My studio looks out over a big field. At certain times of the year, different birds migrate through, so I can spend all of my writing time looking through binoculars, which is actually every bit as good as writing, although you don't feel a sense of pride about it.

*How did *In Zanesville* evolve? Where did it start? With an image? A character?*

I had thought that I wouldn't write another book. I was happy writing shorter, experimental essays. But an editor approached me to write a YA book, and the idea of a novel for teens appealed to me. I ended up writing what became the first chapter of *In Zanesville*, and I really, really liked it. The editors didn't like it; they thought it was too violent. By then I was already hooked. I didn't feel it was a good idea to try to control where the narrative was going, but instead to follow it. The first scene began with a memory of mine and moved out from there until I was writing about people who seemed familiar to me but whom I never knew. Eventually, an editor bought the book as an "A."

*And your evolution—you started out as a painter. At what point did you turn to writing?*

I wasn't very good at painting. The last year I was painting as an undergrad, I'd scratch iconic images into the paintings.

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One of those images was of a tic-tac-toe board. My teacher finally asked me, “Do you think you might be bored with art?” What could be more literal? I took a writing class and realized there was another way I could express myself that would work out better for me.

*In many ways, your main character is haunted by her visual memory. As much as the novel is a coming-of-age story, it also captures a sense of artistic conundrum—that of being simultaneously haunted by memory and chasing memory, or as you put it earlier, “imaging into memory.”*

She’s a ruminator. We’re privy to her thoughts, which are so much of the time so incredibly personal that they don’t seem like they could have much relevance to other people. After all, she’s a sort of every-girl. Both the main character and Flea, her best friend, are wise idiots. But art is going to save the main character’s life. It’s going to release her from the way of life and the milieu she was raised in and that she believes herself to be a part of. It’s her road out.

*There’s a moment in the novel in which, thinking about Max Ernst, your main character has an epiphany about a painting she’s making that “the possibility of the bird was more beautiful than the bird itself.” Could you talk about the connection for you between visualization and language?*

While working on the novel, I read a fantastically beautiful, wrenching memoir, *Between Lives* by Dorothea Tanning. I’d read it. Close it. Open it. Read it again. I would actually spear people and make them listen to me read passages aloud. Tanning writes brilliant run-on sentences that heap words and

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images on top of each other. One of the passages I loved was when she described the death of Max Ernst, her husband. I took down a book of Ernst's (*Ernst Cameo, Great Modern Masters*) from my art shelf and eventually I kept it sitting in the basket next to my chair where I sit to write. During my procrastination time, I would pull out Ernst's book and go through it staring at the paintings. Slowly, the paintings began to find their way into *In Zanesville*.

I do have some regret in not writing about Dorothea Tanning, who is from Galesburg, Illinois, which is close to where I grew up and to where the imagined town of Zanesville, Illinois, would be. My grandparents lived in Galesburg. I would go to her hometown as a kid to visit them. I have a strange, vivid memory of riding in the backseat of my parents' car as a little girl. We were going down some residential street—my sister and brother in the back with me. I looked out my window, and I saw a teenage boy standing outside his house holding up a blue snake. The snake reached all the way to the ground. It's one those childhood memories—you don't know where it came from, but there it is, stuck in my head—a young man, in Dorothea Tanning's town, holding out a live blue snake. What could be more surreal and subconscious and unconscious and beautiful and disassociated than that image? I wrote her a letter about it a couple years ago. She wrote me back—a simple, great thank you.

I'm sorry Dorothea didn't become the artist the main character fell in love with and connected with, but in fact, that's just the way it is. I've always felt interested in Dadaism and the surrealists for that very reason, because Dadaism taps into the unconscious, which is what we do as writers. It makes no apology for that. It lets a dream be a dream.

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*Your main character reads voraciously—from The Yearling to Look Homeward, Angel. Did you go back and read the novels of your youth as you worked on the book?*

I did, including one that I'd never read: *The Red Badge of Courage*. I found it devastating. I still find it devastating. It's an extraordinary book to read when your country is at war on three fronts at once. That book emerges in *In Zanesville* because the main character reads everything she can get her hands on—occasionally, almost by accident, she stumbles on something really good. What's important to me and in relation to *In Zanesville* is the idea of the red badge itself, that the boy was a boy, a child, and that this war book is really about fear, about doing the intelligent thing when faced with close combat—which is to run.

*Not to give anything away, but the last line of In Zanesville is staggering. Were you writing toward that line as you went?*

No. I'm a micro-writer. I tend to write sentence by sentence from the first until the last with little revision. Do you want to hear the story of how those words came about? I could not finish this book. For a year I was saying to people, "I'm almost done with my book. I think I'm going to be done by the end of the week." Then I wouldn't be done. I started panicking. I'd say to Scott, my partner, who is also a writer, "I think I just need two words." Finally, one night we were having a dinner party, and I left the party and went into another room. Scott came into the kitchen and found me freaking out, going, "How can I have people over when I need to be finishing this book? All I need is two words." He said, and I quote, "Well, you know, my two favorite words are—" The next day,

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I went to my studio and I wrote toward those words. I probably wrote three paragraphs. That was the end of the book. Scott could have said anything. He thought he was kidding. How much fun do you think it was to say to him, “Do you want to read the end of my book?” He goes, “Sure.” Then I heard him scream from the other room. Sometimes all you need is someone to create an edge for you, a structure you can push against.

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## Questions and topics for discussion

1. “Forget fathers, forget teachers: our mothers are the ones with the answers . . . although it’s true that the answers are never that great and that both mothers are incredibly bossy and both have at least one disturbing trait” (page 6). How would you describe both the narrator’s and Felicia’s relationship with their mothers? How do these relationships affect each girl’s identity?
2. The narrator describes her “long and silky” hair as her best feature. But she chooses to wear her hair in braids, and explains, “I don’t particularly like having nice hair, though, because it gives people the wrong impression about me” (page 14). What do you think she means by this? What does the story of the “leering dwarf” (page 15) have to do with it?
3. The main character describes herself a number of times as Felicia’s sidekick. Do you think she is satisfied with this role? Are there benefits to seeing herself this way? How does her sense of herself as a sidekick change over the course of the book?

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4. The somewhat comic opening sequence of the book ends in a shocking incident (pages 23–24). How do the girls react to it? Why do you think the narrator chooses not to tell her family about what happened? Were you surprised by the girls' decision on page 53?
5. The protagonist's mother asks, "Don't you two ever get sick of each other?" (page 46). How would you describe the friendship between the girls at the center of the novel? Have you ever had a friend who you spent such intense amounts of time with? If so, what was it about that person, or about that time in your life, that was conducive to this kind of bond?
6. Just as they are about to march as part of the school band, the narrator realizes, "We've made a terrible mistake. Band is weird" (page 63). What about this moment causes her sudden self-consciousness? Do you think she would have come to the same conclusion a year or six months earlier? What does she mean when she says, "I'd like to be the kind of person who can do something weird and not become weird because of it, but that's out of reach for me"? What quality does one need to avoid being defined by what one does? Is it easier or harder to achieve this in adulthood than in high school?
7. Though the narrator can be described as "innocent" in many ways, she and Felicia are quite adept at manipulating grown-ups to get what they want. Can you give some examples of this? As a teenager, did you ever use similar tactics? Do you think this is dangerous acting out, or is it

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a normal part of adolescence? Are the adults in any sense inviting this treatment?

8. “By early evening, I’m sick in love and Felicia isn’t far behind me” (page 76). Were you surprised by the way the girls’ crushes take form? Is their interest in the boys an act of will or genuine attraction (and is there a difference)? Do you think the boys in question approach their crushes in a similar way?
9. Of her father, the narrator says, “He is tall and tanned, with the haunted brown eyes of someone who does something terrible for a living” (page 27). How does she view her father? What does the memory she recounts on pages 108–109 say about how his drinking affects his children?
10. The narrator makes a “reading nest” for herself behind a chair in the living room and says, “This is where the pivotal events of my childhood unfolded” (page 165). What is the role of books and reading in her life? What were some of the “pivotal events” of your childhood that were shared by fictional characters?
11. In her head, the narrator makes a complicated bargain: “Dear God, please. If you make my dad be drunk right now, I’ll do whatever you say” (page 112). Is this a childish way of thinking, or does it indicate maturity beyond her years? Did it surprise you that she holds up her part of the bargain?
12. The narrator has a “sense of impending doom” when she sees her mother’s bras on the laundry table. She also dis-

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cusses “another gloomy contraption that was recently bestowed on me—the sanitary belt” (pages 130–131). How does her reaction to these items illustrate her feelings about growing up? Have the cultural associations with these objects (or their modern counterparts) changed over time? Do you think a teenager today would react in the same way the narrator does in the 1970s?

13. The girls at Jane’s mother’s visitation are concerned that Jane does not seem to be reacting appropriately to the death (page 157). Why do you think she is behaving as she does? Felicia and the narrator have very different reactions to the dead body. Why might this be?
14. “Being a teenager so far hasn’t gotten me anything beyond period cramps and nameless yearning, which I had as a kid too, but this is a new kind of nameless yearning that has boys attached to it” (page 167). The narrator seems to indicate that there is some continuity between childhood and adolescence, as well as a great transition. What do you think this “nameless yearning” is about for her? Have you experienced anything similar, and did it change in nature from childhood to adolescence to adulthood? Were you ever able to name it?
15. At one point during the sleepover party, the narrator comments about Felicia, “Her weakness is giving me strength” (page 179). How does this dynamic shift between them over the course of the party and afterward? How does each girl feel the other has wronged her as a result?

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16. The narrator describes some of the students in her math class as “the usual pack of beautiful ones, known for being good at everything. . . . They’re the ones with money...the rich cream that rises and is eventually skimmed off and sent somewhere else” (pages 141–142). Discuss some ways in which differences in wealth and social status play out in the novel. Do you agree with her assessment that the rich students are more likely to be “good at everything” and to have better opportunities for advancement?

## Jo Ann Beard's suggestions for further reading

Some of the comic, tragic, and sometimes terrifying tales of  
teenagehood that served as inspiration for *In Zanesville*:

*My Perfect Life* and *The Freddie Stories* by Lynda Barry

*Lives of Girls and Women* by Alice Munro

*Who Will Run the Frog Hospital?* by Lorrie Moore

*Cat's Eye* by Margaret Atwood

*Winter's Bone* by Daniel Woodrell

*In Country* by Bobbie Ann Mason

*My Abandonment* by Peter Rock

*Moon Lake* by Eudora Welty



ALSO BY JO ANN BEARD

## The Boys of My Youth

“Smart, funny, and moving. . . . A gifted and gutsy writer. . . . This is what a first collection of stories should be.”

—Barbara Fisher, *Boston Globe*

“Beard remembers (or imagines) her childhood self with an uncanny lucidity that startles.”

—Laura Miller, *New York Times Book Review*

“Extraordinary. . . . Beard is writing not with the romanticism of a girl looking up at the stars, but with the brilliant cold light of the stars looking down on us.”

—Ted Anton, *Chicago Tribune*

“A luminous, funny, heartbreaking book of essays about life and its defining moments.”

—Meredith Kahn, *Harper's Bazaar*



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