The Road from Coorain Study Guide

The Road from Coorain by Jill Ker Conway

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Plot Summary

The Road from Coorain is the autobiography of Jill Ker Conway, a native Australian, historian and the first female president of Smith College. Conway was born in 1934 in Hillston, New South Wales, in the "bush," or Australian "outback," to parents who operated a large sheep station that they named Coorain. Conway had two older brothers, Bob and Barry. While her life in the bush was not filled with other children, she was still happy, social and able to pursue her interests. Her mother, an avid reader and self-educator, taught Conway to read at an early age and Conway read voraciously as a child. She also became familiar with the hard chores required to maintain Coorain.

Conway's parents had taken a risk with Coorain, which had struggled because they had founded it at the beginning of the Great Depression. However Coorain began to flourish and Conway became an integral part of the workforce. When Conway was six, a massive drought began in the bush that lasted for seven years. Conway's father's dream had always been to own and operate a country farm like Coorain; he could not psychologically handle the stress of watching his lifetime investment die before his eyes. In 1944, Conway's father died and appeared to Conway to have killed himself.

The family was devastated by Conway's father's death but her mother would not sell Coorain. Yet three more years without sufficient rain forced Conway's mother, Bob, Barry and Conway into Sydney. Conway's brothers were already used to formal schooling, but Conway was not and found life in Sydney schools difficult at first. Eventually she gained admittance to Abbotsleigh, an elite private girls' school, where she finally started to feel comfortable. Conway also pursued her education avidly, graduating and going to the University of Sydney. She would graduate with honors in history and English in 1958. At college she developed a deep passion for history, particularly for Australian history, along with an interest in the social barriers faced by women in her day.

While Conway was in school, her brother Bob died in a car accident, further devastating their family but particularly devastating Conway's mother. Afterwards, Conway's mother became increasingly interested in the paranormal and developed an alcohol and tranquilizer addiction which made her behavior increasingly volatile. Conway felt obligated to care for her mother, given that her father had charged her with her mother's care before his death. However, through her studies she realized that her mother was manipulative and controlling. After a trip to England and Europe with her mother, Conway decided that she would simply leave Australia and study Australian history at Radcliffe College.

The Road from Coorain is 238 pages and is divided into nine chapters with an uncomplicated chronological structure. It ranges from before Conway was born (giving the necessary background on her parents) to 1960, when Conway is twenty-five. The book was published in 1989.

Chapter 1, The West

Chapter 1, The West Summary and Analysis

Conway grew up in the Western Plains of New South Wales, which are grasslands for hundreds of miles until the desert takes over. The plains are full of brush that vary in size and shape depending on whether the ground collects water. The creatures of the area include kangaroos, emus and wild dogs. Only the busy canary and magpie birds sing songs; the rest are silent.

People have lived on the planes for forty thousand years and persisted until white settlers came one hundred and thirty years ago to let their animals graze and grow crops. However, there were never very many Aborigines, and so the white settlers grew up in a unique environment. Land was cheap so long as it was settled. Australia was a land of convicts, a penal colony where men outnumbered women and this produces the stoic, solitary virtues of convict life. Real men worked hard, were loyal to male friends and were self-sufficient. Religion and belief in God were silly because the world was obviously hostile.

Few women could handle the isolation and the ideal women for Australian men were good managers, those who could make the best of, say, inadequate water. Those who lived in pasture could raise sheep according to various economic strategies, producing large amounts of low-quality wool and small amounts of high-quality wool. Cattle required more protein, grown part-way and then shipped off to richer land.

The first generation settled two hundred and fifty thousand acres, then three hundred thousand and even half a million. They would grave thirty thousand sheep. Planned enterprises made men rich and the large landowners quickly became a powerful political elite. By 1914, most of these farms had been broken up. In 1919, Australia had one of the highest per capita incomes in the world and Australians sent men of extraordinary valor to World War I. They developed a sense of pride and shared identity interacting with other English-speakers. By the 1920s, acquiring title to western land was a chance of a lifetime.

The Australian accent developed as well. Some had a "Scots burr" and others a bit of a Yorkshire flat a. Some had a refined accent, though most spoke "broad Australian" with similarities to Cockney and Irish. Most men were deliberately working class in style. Few lived lives of leisure in the city, for most worked hard for seven days a week. Most preferred leisure at home. Nights were quiet afterwards and almost no one drove save during emergencies.

Chapter 2, Coorain

Chapter 2, Coorain Summary and Analysis

Conway's father had all of his savings invested in a block of land in the Western Division of New South Wales, land he received for being a soldier in 1929. His mother's savings equipped the house with necessities. Her father was excited to have his own land to raise his own livestock, though the isolation was a nightmare to her mother, as she had grown up in a comfortable town in Queensland. She had always lived in cities. Their eighteen thousand acres formed a different world.

Conway's father was born near Port Pirie in the 1890s and orphaned as a child. He started working as a miner at sixteen and the Catholic Church was a central part of his life. He eagerly fought in World War I in part because of his affection for his Lowland Scottish heritage and their common sense of loyalty. His good aim made him a sharpshooter but after a few injuries and the Battle of Passchendaele, he came home. As a single man, however, he did not qualify for land and so instead oversaw a sheep station and met Conway's mother.

Conway's mother was an extraordinary beauty with auburn hair. She had great physical and intellectual energy and was a professionally trained nurse who had run a country hospital. Her parents were British immigrants and her home had enforced traditional gender roles that her mother resented. She left home at her first chance. She loved independence and educated herself. When she married she had been single ten years and on her own. Conway's mother was a modern feminist though she knew the Roman Catholic Church did not like her views. She wanted nothing to do with a faith she thought allowed men to dominate women so irresponsibly. However, Conway's father's Catholic faith was in the background of his mind. World War I had shaken his faith and they had a Protestant marriage service.

Nine months later, their son Robert was born, and in the third year, their child, Barry, was born. Conway's mother enjoyed raising her own children. This family of four moved to the plains.

The property was called Coorain which is aboriginal for "windy place." The house was a low-spreading bungalow surrounded by verandas. They had little water and had to collect it. In the day, Conway's father worked hard in the fields and his mother only talked to her two children. Her father needed the silence, finding real peace there; for her mother, it was frightening. Her mother hated all the housework but she persevered. At night, Conway's father did his records and her mother read steadily, reading systematically. Sometimes she mended and sewed.

The land venture started at the worst time because sheep grazing is capital-intensive and takes awhile to make money back; they started during a period of drought and the Great Depression. So they had to live as self-sufficiently as possible. After three years,

annual wool sales made money and they could travel to Sydney for dental and medical care. Conway's mother was surprised to discover that she had become a countrywoman.

Her medical checkup showed that Conway's mother had benign uterine growths so large they could cause a fatal hemorrhage; she also discovered that she was pregnant. She was frustrated by the health problem and the extra expense so she tried to force an abortion naturally but when she failed, she was told that she must terminate the pregnancy and have a hysterectomy. Her reaction to male dominance pushed her in the other direction and she went back to Coorain. She was in danger and it is not clear how much Conway's father knew.

Jill Conway was born without incident, however. They had enough money for her father to hire help and the land began to grow. Conway's mother organized her sons to do the hard chores on an unbreakable schedule. Conway remembers the schedule and her mother's singing. Jill and her brothers would usually wait for her father until he came home in the late afternoon or early evening.

Chapter 3, Childhood

Chapter 3, Childhood Summary and Analysis

Due to her parent's frugality, hard work and creativity, the sheep station became nicer and nicer over time. New comforts were steadily added. When Conway was five an enormous amount of rain poured down over a few days. Conway's parents were middle-aged in the prime of their lives. They had a young family and great plans; their success did not make them lazy. They were also concerned with international affairs and followed the rise of fascism and the events that led towards World War II.

Conway worshipped her older brother Bob, who was six years older than her. He led their childhood play. He had great emotional and physical energy and deep composure. He treated Conway gently. Barry had the sunny disposition and was the gentlest. Both boys were kind to her. Conway's mother imposed strict equality upon them due to her upbringing. They had a governess who taught them, Miss Grant. They all quickly caught on to the easy lessons in writing and arithmetic. Conway learned early and quickly her mother had her reading. So Conway would read with her mother at nights.

In 1940, Bob left for boarding school in Sydney and the separation was terribly difficult. Bob was self-reliant but would be in and out of school, doing as he liked. Eventually Conway's parents sent Barry back to school with Bob, in order that they might watch each other. They both went to King's School, one of the nicest schools in the country. Transition to the city was hard and the other country boys would not work hard. Between World War II and her brothers' absence, Conway was alone at Coorain with her parents. There were now few yard hands. All men were drafted to fight the Japanese. Her father could not be drafted; he had heart problems, apparently the result of being gassed. Conway's parents were proud and patriotic, so they managed alone and contributed to the war effort, though running Coorain became harder.

For help, Conway's father hired an old Bushman named Bob McLennan who could do many of the important farm tasks without the use of gasoline. Conway would help him. His main job was to find a clean well of water which he and Conway did after several months. The aquifer never faltered and brought miracles. Household chores were easier and the soil was fertile. Anything could be grown, fruits, vegetables and even flowers.

Conway was educating herself by reading everything she could. She became her father's station hand eventually and helped her father with the sheep. Along the way, she asked endless questions about everything in the world. Conway tended toward theological and moral questions, often about killing animals and killing in wartime.

After the aquifer was built, Conway's father had a shearing shed constructed by an excellent carpenter named Obecue and six to eight shearers came over to Coorain to work in the shed. Conway enjoyed watching them shear and getting to know some of them.

Conway's mother decided that she would take up some war-related work to help the local Red Cross. One of Conway's favorite activities was organizing and running fundraisers. These events gave Conway's parents opportunities to socialize with other adults which gave Conway a fresh view of them, seeing her parents dressed up and lively. The Red Cross fundraisers regularly won awards for the amount of money they raised; Conway's mother loved using her organizational powers for a good cause. What might have looked like a lonely childhood contained happiness, friends and stimulation, though it lacked other children (Conway did not see another female child until she was seven). She knew she was loved and had the attention of her parents.

Chapter 4, Drought

Chapter 4, Drought Summary and Analysis

After 1941, there were no significant rainfalls for five years; a terrible drought unfolded. Conway was in her eighth year of school in 1942 and was doing private correspondence school. Studying was a leisure activity given her other work. Conway's father's spirits declined with the land. One day, many of the sheep were lost due to wind and cold rain, and Conway's father's spirits declined and he lost his calm. Anxiety filled the house. Household routine fell apart and Conway's father started to have mood swings and imposed strict punishment. When Bob visited home, he aired his growing doubts about religion which brought out the tension between his parents on religious matters. Bob was treated as unnatural for his doubts. Conway herself was puzzled about religion since both of her parents' faiths seemed to make them moral.

In February 1943, Conway came into the house one day to find her mother feeling her father's pulse. The heat and anxiety had brought back her father's irregular heartbeat acquired during the war. Conway had to take over her father's work. Then in March, a terrible dust storm hit from the central Australian desert. The storm lasted for days and blotted out the sun. The storm triggered Conway's father's nightmares from the war. Grass was destroyed in the yard, and though there were many dead sheep, fewer were killed than expected. However, that was only the first storm.

Already upset about her father's poor health, Conway was shocked to learn in Spring, 1943, that her mother had to go to Sydney for a hysterectomy which would require months of recuperation. Conway was sent to live with a family thirty miles away. Conway's mother was gone for eight weeks. She had caught a cold before the surgery and had gotten pneumonia. She returned pale and never quite recovered.

In the late summer of 1944, they only had half of their original sheep. Without rain, none of them would survive. Conway's parents realized they would have to go into debt, which they had grown up dreading. They borrowed money to buy wheat and hire help, two half aboriginal, half-Chinese brothers, Ron and Jack. Feeding the sheep was hard but it worked in the end. Each day Conway's father took a death blow and he started to encourage Conway to sell Coorain when he died and make sure her mother went to the city. He demanded that Conway make something of herself. The evil Conway endured made her conclude that God's morality was below that of humanity's.

Conway read constantly; she had no playmates. Her parents admired her talent and learning.

In June, most of the elder sheep were too weak to be shorn. To cheer up her father, Conway would often tell him the news about the Normandy invasion and how well it was going, which lifted his spirits. Most Australians became frightened when the British base in Singapore fell. Australia had only a small supply of able-bodied men left and it was

unclear if they could defend themselves, as Australia was dispensable in Britain's defense strategy. The government changed hands and the Labor Party took over. Despite the fact that Conway's parents were individualists who despised socialism, they were heartened when Prime Minister John Curtin asked for American help. Loyalty to Great Britain and love for Australia came apart for the first time.

After the June shearing in 1944, it became clear that if it did not rain in the spring, the sheep would all die. Ron and Jack left for another job. The rain never came. Dust storms came twice a month. Carrion birds were everywhere. Conway's mother was unconquerable but she could not rouse her father's spirits. As things declined, there was little to do in Coorain.

One morning Conway woke up to find her father staring herr in the face. He told her goodbye and jumped in his truck, speeding away. Conway and her mother were not sure where he went. He was gone much longer than he was supposed to. Bob eventually reported that his father had been in an accident extending piping into a dam. They found him in the water. The funeral was two days later and the children heard their mother sob horribly for the first time in their lives. Barry and Conway were sent to stay with friends for a few days. It always remained unclear to them how their father had died. Conway never told anyone about his early morning visit to her.

Conway's mother refused to sell Coorain when it was worth so little. She would run it herself. The boys would help her and she would hire help as well. She was resolute to preserve what she and her husband had built. Conway received a lesson in feminism when the valuation agent told her mother that her investments were merged into her father's estate when he died and that she would have to pay major death duties. Conway's mother complained about the economic injustice for years.

To help, Conway's uncle and his wife came to help her mother. They stayed, against the law due to their wartime jobs, to comfort her. By February they were only feeding several hundred sheep and they were in bad shape. However, when crutching time came all the neighbors helped her mother. When the boys went back to school in June, there was little to do. Conway's mother ate little, constantly wept and seemed always in a trance. Angus, one of the neighbors, encouraged Conway to leave because there was simply nothing she could do to help her mother and to save Coorain. He then told her mother the same.

They then found a good manager for Coorain, Geoff Coghlan. Conway's mother would now live in Sydney. It was hard to leave Coorain and was, for awhile, beyond Conway's ability to comprehend. The day they left, it was both a relief and a sentence. They then took a train to Sydney and while they were full of grief, they truly were relieved. Coorain had turned from paradise to purgatory. They had lost their former purpose in life and it had been too much to bear.

Chapter 5, Schooling

Chapter 5, Schooling Summary and Analysis

The train to Sydney was long and full of observations. City life was unfamiliar and there was a serious question about where they would live. Towards the end of the war, the city had built no new housing. The city was a staging point for thousands of Americans in the South Pacific. A housing black market had arisen. They eventually found an upstairs portion in a nearby suburb, Mosman, to live in. It was near the ocean. Conway enrolled in Queenwood School. The small world of school was alien and intimidating. Conway did not know how to play with other eleven-year-olds. The routines were foreign and physical education was bizarre. Conway's preferences for conversation were different from most other places. No girls from the bush were there. Schoolwork was very easy.

As time progressed, Conway's mother adjusted. Her body relaxed and the tension fell away from her body. She ate and slept regularly. Friends visited and she recovered slowly. Conway's brothers would now visit regularly and this was a real pleasure. Life was relatively carefree while the children were in school; the first months in Sydney were happy.

One day Conway came down with a streptococcal infection which required her to stay at home. It turned out that Conway had pneumonia and pleurisy and had to go to the hospital but her mother insisted on helping her. She was wonderful, a natural healer. New, miraculous sulfa drugs quickly cured Conway's fever.

It became clear that rain was not coming to Coorain and that their income would dry up. This required Conway's mother to get a job. They found a smaller home further outside of town in Waitara. The further away suburb had its own charms. Christmas was hard due to grief over Conway's father's death. In January, Conway had to go to public school, what she considered a step down. She entered a snob and the boys were unruly. Girls used bad language and many pupils were caned. Conway did not know how to behave or the rules of social boundaries. Conway did not speak broad Australian and she had been taught to copy British manners. Conway's mother did not force her to go back. Looking back, Conway realized that she would have learned a lot about the Australian class system had she stayed, knowledge that would have been valuable for her future interests.

Conway's mother persuaded the headmistress of Abbotsleigh, one of the best private schools for girls in Sydney, to accept her. She began at once. The headmistress had been educated in Europe and bore European cultural ideals in Australia. She loved learning for itself, which pleased Conway. At school she felt that she had entered paradise and she quickly made friends. Curriculum came from Great Britain and was uninfluenced by progressive ideas. English was wonderful, history illuminating, math was challenging and art and music were included. While the curriculum ignored being

Australian, Conway still got an enormous out of it. The culture there was very much traditional British. Speech was even regulated to remove Australian diphthongs. They were trained to believe they were leaders and discipline was strict. Hardiness was the highest virtue.

In her second term, Conway started to board there. She enjoyed constantly and systematically disobeying the rules. Her life in the bush had made her very independent and anti-authoritarian. She once got in trouble. Conway was not a popular student, nor was she pretty. She gained weight, had a poor complexion and was ungainly. She was too proud to change her appearance. She was socially inept but intellectually precocious. She was also never modest and cared little for social hierarchies.

Conway's mother continued to work hard. She refused to marry again and loved her husband so deeply that she could not permit herself to love again. She also did not want to raise her children with anyone else. She hated that other men were even alive. Conway's brothers came to love music. Bob started to play the trumpet and Barry the clarinet. They loved jazz. Conway's mother's code of thrift, hard work and sobriety served her well in a previous era but her children had little use for it, preferring excitement. They loved the idea of prosperity and loved American culture. The boys found the best jobs they could and used their education as a doorway to opportunity.

In 1948 the returns from Coorain picked up and this allowed Conway's mother to buy a proper house in Pennant hills. It was close enough to Abbotsleigh for Conway to become a day student. They lived the dream there. Bob took music. Barry and Bob shared an interest in machines. Since she spent so much time with her brothers, Conway was never fully in contact with her generation. She was not very interested in romantic attachments. She loved her family and was utterly absorbed with her studies. She did everything well academically save math. Most of the teachers were wonderful.

In 1949, Conway's attitude transformed from adolescent rebellion to genuine intellectual interests. She rejected her religious faith entirely due to the disaster at Coorain and the pictures of Belsen and Dachau, along with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. At the time it convinced her Christianity was false, though it might have convinced her of original sin. Her mother became interested in Theosophy and spiritualism. This was partly to deal with her grief.

When Bob turned twenty-one, three tensions arose in the family. Conway's mother would not permit a party at the house because she disapproved of the youth culture. They disagreed about the presence of alcohol as well. There was no celebration. Conway's mother ultimately never wanted to be part of the social world of a large city; it was beyond her consciousness.

One day Bob left on a trip to compete with a friend in a road rally. He was excited. However, that night a policeman came to the door and told them that Bob had been killed in a car accident. Conway waited a time to tell her mother. Conway felt a sharp physical loss and realized that she felt obliged to live up to his expectations of her, just

as with her father. She found Barry in the house and they called their uncle so he could tell Conway's mother. The grief was greater than when losing their father.

Chapter 6, Finding the Southern Cross

Chapter 6, Finding the Southern Cross Summary and Analysis

The grief Conway felt after Bob's death was soul shattering; she lost her ability to have ordinary emotional responses. She stopped playing the piano altogether and became lost in her studies. Conway and Barry did what they could to get their mother out of the house. She was always more devastated than they were and now expected that their own lives would end by accidental death.

Conway's mother's only distraction was her membership in a small society for psychic research which had many different breeds of eccentric. Women dominated the meetings and while most were very intelligent, they claimed great knowledge about dubious topics. Conway's education had made her too skeptical. The group, in her view, catered to her mother's worst fears and started to take advantage of her financially. Luckily, one of the seedier male members of the society made a sexual advance on Conway which caused her mother to take a second look. Conway's mother never went back, though she ceased looking for adult company.

Barry found it difficult to find a sense of purpose after Bob's death, despite the fact that their financial fortunes flourished since wool was selling well. They started to acquire status symbols. In August of 1949, Conway's mother was energized by the need to nurse a dying friend, Eva McInness. Until Eva died, she had a sense of purpose. Fearing another lonely Christmas, Conway's mother planned an eight-week Christmas cruise to Ceylon, to miss the holidays, and brought Conway, Barry and Eva's daughter along. The trip was a very good idea, as the new experiences got their minds off things. They met many unusual people and heard many wonderful stories.

However, the non-British world of Ceylon shocked Conway's cultural sensibilities. She had never seen a caste society. The extremes of poverty disoriented her and she sensed a resentment of the British. She learned about the Buddha for the first time and wondered why she was never taught about it. Despite these new insights, Conway did not enjoy traveling due to its irregularity. Near the end of the voyage, they were ready to return home. While they had thought less about Bob's death, Conway's mother realized that she had introduced her children to the life of wealth she had wanted to protect them from and quickly started to pester them into productivity.

When Conway returned to school, her mother's pestering ended, but she was harder on Barry, sending him back to Coorain where he would be alone without friends or new ideas. During this test of endurance, Barry became more emotionally private and developed a more stoic view of life. To cure his loneliness, Conway's mother encouraged Barry's friends to join him and bought him a small plane so that he could easily commute. After eight months, Barry left Coorain.

Abbotsleigh was a happy place for Conway; she was busily studying. The curriculum was interesting now that they were studying European history. She also learned French. T.S. Eliot was an inspirition for her and she acquired authority as a student prefect. Inside the group she was responsible for, they were noisy, irreverent and lighthearted. They also had to struggle with societal expectations. Their teachers expected them to develop their minds and serve society but many felt the pressure to be society women and avoid male-dominated professions.

Conway did not want to leave Abbotsleigh but she knew that her life would be different; she was so different from her school friends anyway. Her interests and appearance prevented her from being distracted by young men and she was considered "brainy," which was a bad thing in Australia, particularly for a woman. She considered the University of Sydney, but she was anxious about what she was to do with her future. When Conway graduated, she was scared.

Around graduation, Conway's mother had fractured her wrist which the doctors thought indicated a larger problem. Why did she fall? Why was she so easily angered these days? Conway would have to take care of her mother and it was not clear whether she could get away and whether she should want to.

Chapter 7, The Nardoo Stones

Chapter 7, The Nardoo Stones Summary and Analysis

Conway eventually decided that she would attend the University of Sydney. The campus excited her. In late 1952, Conway consulted the Adviser to Women Students and they settled on a first-year program. At first Conway was shy and lonely. She could not blend in and worried about her mother. Her courses were difficult and often focused excessively on fine points of detail. She became bored and decided to drop out. Barry was just leaving Coorain and would be using his new Auster aircraft to launch a country air charter service; he was happy from then on and he was very talented at his job. He found his own way and his group of friends expanded.

Conway's mother became increasingly sick. Her gallbladder became inflamed, she had high blood pressure and her thyroid enlarged. Due to hyperthyroidism, Conway's mother had to avoid being overexcited such that Conway did not feel that she could disagree with her. Conway returned to Coorain, eager for distance and physical labor. She worked for Geoff, the manager, and did her best to avoid being soft. On the way she decided that she would not be financially dependent on her mother and sought a job, which she found in the form of a medical practice receptionist's position.

The next year and a half she lost many burdens. Her work was fascinating, as were the patients. Her shyness became pointless. She also became a practical assistant nurse. She also read her employer's medical texts and enjoyed a concentrated education. However, she most enjoyed observing the social context around each patient and his or her family. Conway's mother gave her respect for her job and her mood improved. When Conway learned about dieting, she quickly lost weight and started to wear suitable clothes. One of Conway's older brother's friends started to express interest in her.

After a year, the job lost interest for her. Conway had a lot saved and her mother was healthy. Coorain had enough help and she decided to return to university in 1954. She studied history, English and psychology and knew how to talk to strangers. She quickly made friends with Toni, a girl her age, and her older brother. They came from a country family as well. They simply aimed to pass their courses and otherwise skipped lectures. Conway joined them and kept up with her courses in the evenings or weekends. However, eventually Conway's mother caught on and after she took her exams, her mother sternly lectured her. Over the break Conway discovered that she had done quite well on her exams. She had found something she could do well and had a purpose in life. Her mother would never block her success now.

By her second year, people knew who Conway was. Everyone took notice of her on campus and she decided to focus on history. Conway's courses were challenging and she reveled in the history of ideas. Marx and Engels caused her to worry whether her family were monopolizers and exploiters of workers. They also made her think about her

mother's outraged complaints about the product of her labor being subsumed into her father's assets. Conway quickly met some campus Communists and began to spend time with her rowdy new left-wing friends in bars and their union pals. Conway was not a communist but she was interested in class structure in Australia.

Much of Conway's reading caused her to see her childhood, and her mother, in a different light. She came to love the intellectual life, finding the clarity of study the closest thing to the vision of God that she knew. She was drawn into Carl Jung's collected works, discovering his powerful analysis of mother-daughter relations which she thought fit her own experience perfectly.

Conway met a new friend, Nina Morris, who impressed her with her energy for life, her social curiosity and her religious sensibility, and five others, Cam McKinney, Vanessa Schneider, Patty O'Connel, Ken Hosking, and Hugh Gore. In the second half of her second year, several others came into the group, including an English-educated Australian, Peter Stone, who became her frequent escort. He loved clever women, unlike most Australian men and he loved someone with a sense of purpose in her life. They were ideal companions but their emotional attachment complicated Conway's life. Her mother waged war on the relationship and Peter resented how much time Conway gave to her work, which she prized above all else.

Conway's work became more interesting in her third year when she studied European imperialism, the British Empire, the United States and so on. She became morally concerned with the effects of imperialism in other countries and then wondered about those same effects in Australia. She had been trained to imitate the English upper class, but it was no longer clear that this was a good idea. Her change in worldview made relating to the older generation difficult. Her mother was heartbroken by many of her new views. She also realized that her greatly admired T.S. Eliot had genuinely converted to Christianity and found his Christian poetry beautiful. She never knew she could entertain religious belief before.

Conway found Australian historians frustrating. The right focused only on the elite in their histories and the left focused only on oppression. Conway rejected thinking about history only in terms of the history of the upper class but also thought that only capitalism could have rised Australian from a slave society to a free society. Conway wanted to know more about the history of the bush, which so many ignored.

Later in the year, Professor Manning Clark delivered lectures on Australian history which explained how the Australian imagination was formed by the expanse of the continent and not just the urban areas. He also maintained that Australian historians implicitly saw Australian culture as inferior to that of Europe. Conway passionately agreed and wrote a term paper about it. She was determined to write about Australian history and be part of changing her country's culture and external relations. She and her friends applied for admission to the junior ranks of the Australian Department of External Affairs which would lead to a post abroad. However, this put a strain on her felt obligations to Peter and her mother. She did not handle the strains well and took to drinking to deal with her

conflicts between ambition, love and duty. Due to the stress, Conway only barely made it through her final exams.

Conway's twenty-third year was golden. She carried out a major piece of historical research and turned it into a dissertation. Conway became engrossed in her research and spent time with friends in her time off. She loved the idea of becoming a genuine historian and reconstructing the past. She worked hard at the early stages of Australian social history. Conway's friends received invitations to join the Department of External Affairs but after her interviews, Conway was rejected. It was because she was a woman, which was proved by reports on her. This depressed her. She now understood what injustice based in biological superiority meant. She was appalled that she could not earn her freedom through merit.

Chapter 8, Recharting the Globe

Chapter 8, Recharting the Globe Summary and Analysis

While in retrospect, Conway was glad she did not get the job at External Affairs, she was, in her twenties, depressed about the professional barriers faced by women. Her sympathy with other women gave her new sympathy from her mother, who was falling deeper into alcoholism and filthy language. Women had no creative expression for their talents and so they often manipulated their children. Conway even wondered whether she wanted to try to be a part of the Australian scholarly world at all. However, luckily, Conway met a young man who had returned from doctoral work in the United States; he helped her think less parochially.

Conway went with her mother to England and Europe. The trip was wonderful, despite her mother being difficult. However, seeing the buildings she had read about was a bit disappointing. After seeing England, they set out for France, Spain and Portugal. Conway's mother enjoyed Latin culture and came to relax. Conway focused on observing architecture, particularly medieval architecture. He mother was blind to the beauty due to her hatred of Catholic culture. Their days in Catalonia were particularly relaxing and wonderful.

After leaving Spain, Conway's mother's good spirits vanished. Receiving letters, Conway's mother discovered that Barry was about to marry his sweetheart of the moment and that the manager of Coorain had used her absence to undertake maintenance projects. She scarcely noticed where she was. They traveled to Geneva and then to Paris. After seeing the political state of France, her mother wanted to leave and by late summer, they had spent more than six months in England. Conway had seen all the parts of Elizabethan London she wanted to. Conway made a number of friends and had many good conversations though many of the English looked down their nose at Australians. British class consciousness was awful and Conway could hardly stand it. She also noted how the Anglican Church had become merged with the worship of the British Empire and the self-satisfied exploitation of colonial peoples.

As the year wore on, Conway became bored. However, she decided that she was going home to study history. She now saw English culture as alien, hating that she was a colonial in a metropolitan society. Conway told her mother that she would establish her in Sydney and then told her she would not be living with her. Before they returned, they learned that Barry had married.

Chapter 9, The Right Country

Chapter 9, The Right Country Summary and Analysis

When they returned to Sydney, Conway did not immediately move out. Coorain needed tending to due to a new breeding strategy. They now sold mostly to Japan and the Japanese demanded different styles of wool. Conway took a teaching assistantship in the History Department as an M.A. student in Australian history. She then had economic independence and loved teaching. She had no course work and simply found her own thesis topic, an adviser and went on to write. Her adviser was John Ward. She published several articles derived from her undergraduate honors thesis and the essays were well-received. She received a reputation as a future contributor to Australian history.

She was now a member of a new society. They ignored generational differences and academic hierarchy was minor. Students called their professors by their first names. Conway then describes some of her fellow faculty. Nonetheless, the actual structure of Australian universities was very hierarchical. John Ward, however, was a good advisor. Conway roomed with a Ruth Chavasse, an Englishwoman who was studying medieval history. In 1959, Ward asked Conway if she would give the lectures in his American history survey course due to some medical treatment he needed. She even had to make up her own syllabus. This made Conway busy very quickly. Australian and American history books became her companions.

Conway found her first lectures daunting. However, she overcame her intimidation despite being shy and a woman. Eventually she enjoyed teaching. Outside the University most looked on a woman in academics in an odd way. Conway was a little bothered by their relaxed sexual mores, however. Many were at pains to tolerate her social attitudes. Sexual liberation in her view had mixed results. Radicalism was difficult in Australia since the left party, the Labor Party, was conservative and straight-laced. Her radical friends were mostly isolated and alienated. Conway was still most at home in the bush and increasingly loved the backcountry people. She even considered settling in Coorain but knew that she would become eccentric and live alone.

In early 1959, Conway went to spend a week with her brother, sister-in-law and their newborn son David. Conway loved it there and felt that her life was socially empty. The first night of her stay they had dinner with one of Barry's friends in his air charter business, an American named Alec Merton. He was mild-mannered, in his mid-thirties and from Arizona, now working in Phoenix. Later into the night after drinking, Conway beat half a dozen men in poker. When she drove home with Alec, he seemed like a highly articulate man with a profound view of life. He dropped her off and kissed her goodnight. He told Barry that he was attracted to her reckless gambling, looks and brains.

Alec started to visit Conway in Sydney. He respected her work and did not try to distract her. Alec's business involved speculative risk. As such, he could live in the moment and not worry about tomorrow. He also made clear that he would marry in the faith and Conway made clear that she wanted an independent career. Nonetheless they took the time to be happy. Alec encouraged Conway to develop her gifts and had little patience for Australian stoicism; he encouraged her to be open about her emotions, read theology and cultivate faith in a good God. They were very happy together, spending time together for a few months out of the year.

However, by their second winter, they realized they were in danger of becoming too attached. They decided to part ways before they fell in love too much. They left distraught but had given each other emotional strength and confidence. Conway dealt differently with her life. Life with her mother grew worse as her mother became increasingly paranoid and exploded in rage often. Soon Barry and his wife Roslyn visited with her mother's first grandson. The visit went well up until the end when Conway's mother was shouting wild accusations at Roslyn. The incident did great harm and Conway could do nothing about it. Afterwards, Conway's mother demanded that she agree with her that what she did was justified but Conway refused. Her mother was now angry and vindictive, and particularly destructive towards her children.

Soon thereafter, Conway decided that she would admit defeat in caring for her mother and be life affirming. She took care of Coorain before leaving but then did nothing for her mother again. Conway would abandon her felt duty to her mother after much suffering. She decided to go to graduate school at Radcliffe since she could not do new Australian history at Sydney. Conway was accepted and dealt with the silence that accompanied telling her mother she was leaving; she did not tell her mother she was never coming back, however, and she never did.

Conway did not see going to America as an odyssey; she knew she would never wholly fit in. She just wanted to do serious work and make a difference. She realized that she had enabled her mother's addiction to alcohol and tranquilizers and wished she had fought her harder. She could not blame men. When Conway left, she gave her mother a simple farewell. She demanded to be left alone by all of her friends, save Nina. As she left, Conway wondered where she would die and where her body would lie. She comforted herself that her dust would one day return to Australia and probably blow into someone's eyes. She was happy with that thought.

Characters

Jill Ker Conway

Jill Key Conway (1934-) was born in New South Wales in the Australian outback to a family of four—her mother, father and two brothers, Bob and Barry. Jill grew up "in the bush" on her parents' sheep station known as Coorain, after which Road from Coorain is named. She was a bright young girl, adored her older brothers, was eager to learn from her mother and dutifully helped her father with whatever help she could from an early age. Despite the fact that Jill did not see a girl her age until age seven, she lived a happy and fulfilled life until a drought largely destroyed Coorain's sheep herds and her father killed himself.

After three years of Jill's mother trying to maintain Coorain, the Ker family was forced to move into Sydney, where life eventually settled into a normal pace, despite the fact that Jill's mother was forever changed and now addicted to alcohol and painkillers. Jill quickly flourished in school and combined a love of scholarship and learning with a wily and anti-authoritarian element. She became a heavy drinker and while she was shy, loved spending time with friends.

As her life progressed, Jill focused more and more on scholarship, having less and less time for other things. However, she did maintain what was, on reflection, an unhealthy relationship with her mother, allowing her mother to manipulate her and enabling her addiction until Jill finally left for the United States to go to graduate school. Jill is the book's main character and its author.

Conway's Mother

Jill's mother was born to a fairly well-to-do family in Sydney. She was a city girl, though she married a country boy, Jill's father, and moved out to Coorain—her husband's lifelong dream, but what was, at first, her nightmare. Jill's mother was deeply anti-authoritarian and hostile to Roman Catholicism. She was an ardent feminist who believed strongly in self-education. Accordingly, she maintained the house at Coorain but maintained sacred reading time for herself each night. As time progressed, Jill's mother became increasingly adjusted to country life and had three children—Bob, Barry and Jill. She worked her children hard and kept them on a tight schedule, along with insisting that they be well-educated. She also taught Jill to read at an early age.

When her husband died, Jill's mother was distraught. Due in part to bad health, she had access to sedatives and tranquilizers, to which she became addicted. Alcohol also started to play an increasingly dark role in her life. She did what she could to hold onto her husband's dream at Coorain until she and her children were forced to move to Sydney. While life became somewhat normal there, she became interested in the paranormal and theosophy through a club that nearly bilked her out of money.

As her addiction progressed, Jill's mother became increasingly controlling and manipulative and, through guilt, compelled Jill to aid her. Their relationship grew icy over time, though it occasionally thawed. Ultimately Jill extricated herself from their relationship and left her mother behind, partly blaming herself for her mother's decline.

Conway's Father

Jill's father had a lifelong dream to own and operate a sheep station farm in the Australian outback. Together with his wife, he bought and maintained Coorain through many years of difficulties, causing it to flourish. However, after years of drought and watching his fortunes ebb away, Jill's father (probably) committed suicide while out on an errand. He was generally a good, kind father with a somewhat serious, but private, Catholic faith. However, in the end depression overwhelmed him. He charged Jill with caring for her mother when he was gone.

Robert Conway

Jill's oldest brother, a tall, handsome and musically talented man, Jill adored him until his death in a car accident on the way to a piano competition.

Barry Conway

Jill's second brother, older than she was. Barry had a kinder and more relaxed temperament than Jill or his older brother. After school, he started an air courier services, married a woman named Roslyn and had a son named David. He too was manipulated by his mother but after she verbally assaulted his wife, their relationship was severed. On the other hand, Jill and Barry always had a good relationship.

Coorain Farmworkers

For much of their time at Coorain, the Ker family employed various farm workers who became a part of Jill's young life.

Conway's Abbotsleigh Friends

When Jill went to Abbotsleigh she made friends and was ultimately responsible for a group of girls that she became close to.

Conway's University Friends

When Jill went to the University of Sydney she made a number of close friends in her second and third years, some of whom remained friends after she went to the United States. They all worked hard and had great ambitions.

Conway's University Colleagues

When Jill became an M.A. student, she had a number of good colleagues and a good advisor but the department generally had quite loose sexual mores that made Jill uncomfortable.

Peter Stone

Jill's first significant other, a smart, supportive boy who was nonetheless jealous that she put her work first.

Alec Merton

Jill's second significant other, an American man in his thirties who ran his own company, Alec always supported Jill's work and never resented her. However, since they wanted different things in life, they ultimately had to go their separate ways, which was quite painful for them.

Objects/Places

Australia

Jill Conway's homeland and the setting for almost all of the book.

New South Wales

The Australian province where Jill grew up.

Coorain

The sheep station that the Ker family owned, operated and lived on for most of the book and had managed for the rest.

Sydney

When Jill's mother could no longer maintain Coorain, they were forced to move to Sydney.

The

The colloquial name for the Australian outback.

Abbostleigh

The elite private girls high school in Sydney where Jill was educated.

The University of Sydney

Jill received her degree in English and History from the University of Sydney.

The Department of External Affairs

The part of the Australian government responsible for a number of matters to do with Australian relations with other countries. Jill wanted to become an intern to continue her studies but for sexist reasons she was excluded.

Europe and England

Jill grew up, like many Australians, admiring and emulating English and European culture, though over time she came to reject any sense of superiority of European culture to her own.

The United States

It was the United States that ultimately came to Australia's aid during World War II and had a major cultural impact on the country after the war. Jill grew up listening to American music and watching American movies and ultimately went to the United States to get her PhD.

Sheep Farming

Coorain was a sheep station that was responsible for raising, maintaining, breeding and shearing sheep.

Self-Education

Jill's mother was self-educated and for most of Jill's childhood, Jill was too.

Class Structure

Jill quickly became interested in the class structure in Australian social life as she became intellectually aware.

Theosophy

A doctrine of religious mysticism which holds that all religions have part of the truth; Jill's mother became interested in it when the Ker family moved to Sydney, partly as a way to escape her grief.

Alcohol and Tranquilizers

Jill's mother became addicted to alcohol and tranquilizers after her husband's death.

Australian History

Jill fell in love with Australian history as she studied it and decided that she wanted to write a "new" kind of Australian history. It was this desire that led her to Radcliffe College in the United States.

The World of Ideas

Jill fell in love with ideas at an early age and never lost that love, putting it above all others.

Religion

Jill always had a spiritual element in her life despite having no formal faith. Despite her mother's hostility to traditional religion, Jill was on occasion attracted to it, though she never converted.

Co-Dependency

Jill realized in retrospect that she had developed a co-dependent relationship with her mother.

Tragic Death

The Road from Coorain is characterized by two tragic deaths—the death of Jill's father and her brother Bob.

Themes

Family Tragedy and Dysfunction

The Road from Coorain begins prior to Jill Conway's birth, with the history of her parents, who, despite their differing backgrounds, marry, acquire Coorain and move there to build a life togethert. Over time, their lives grow intertwined and they produce a family. Conway's mother finds that she has become a country woman. Sadly, however, this unity does not last forever. When the draught comes, Conway's father lets himself fall into a deep depression that ultimately leads to his (probable) suicide. The family is stuck in tragedy, particularly Conway's mother who in one way never recovers from the loss of her husband.

Conway's father's death marks a significant turning point in the book. While her mother runs Coorain for another three years, she was only putting off the inevitable move to Sydney and handing Coorain over to a manager. She loses her original hardworking spirit and is sucked into spiritual and occult practices along with alcohol and tranquilizer addiction. Conway's mother's dysfunction leads to dysfunction in the family as a whole, with Conway's mother manipulating her children and Barry and Conway enabling her.

Things only become worse when Bob dies, the next major family tragedy. Due to her addiction, Conway's mother becomes increasingly angry with life and prone to outbursts due to a temper that grows with each passing day. While Conway and her brother recovere and live flourishing lives, Conway's mother never does and Conway ultimately has to sever her relationship with her mother as a result.

The Love of Ideas

Jill Ker Conway becomes a professional historian and the first female president of Smith College. Today, she is a visiting professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. However, her intellectual interests date back to an early point in her life, as explained in The Road to Coorain. Conway's mother is self-educated and self-conscious about it. One of her pleasures is to finish her chores during the day and reserve time for reading at night. Conway's mother helps Conway learn to read at an early age, and so Conway has an education in addition to that given by her governess.

Conway's first experience with formal schooling is negative but for high school she ends up at Abbotsleigh, an elite private school for girls in Sydney. Her learning experience there is very positive and she does quite well in general. While she is not sure whether she wants to go to college, Conway eventually attends the University of Sydney where she studies English and History. Her last three years are full of intense study and an increasing interest in history, particularly the history of Australia.

Conway earns an M.A. in history and is convinced that she not only wants to be a professional historian but that she wants to write a new kind of Australian history that is

neither right-wing, focusing only on the story of the Australian elite, or the left-wing, importing an ideology that causes them to see the history of Australia as merely one of imperialism and wickedness. At twenty-five, Conway leaves home to study history at Radcliffe College in the United States.

Hearth and Home

Conway's youth is spent on a sheep station in the "bush," or Australian outback. Her father is a spiritual man who expresses his spirituality partly through solitude in his work in the fields of Coorain. Conway identifies with her father's sense of spirituality inspired by the beauty of the outback—its geography, flora, fauna and its people. Conway typically gets along better with the people of the "backcountry" rather than those in Sydney. In her travels to other countries, Conway always feels that she is not at home and knows that she never will.

Conway loves her family dearly, spending all of her time with them until her father dies and the family moves to Sydney. She adores her brothers and spends more time with them in Sydney than she does with friends until she is in college and her brother Bob dies. Conway also feels obligated to care for her mother as her father charges her with her mother's care after he dies. This attachment to home is ultimately destructive, as it leads Conway to enable her mother's addictions.

Conway's greatest expression of love for her homeland is her decision to study Australian history and to try and carve out a historical methodology that recognizes the importance of backcountry life to Australian history and the importance of peoples other than Australian elites. However, she resists ideological perspectives that cast her country's history in a wholly negative light.

Style

Perspective

Jill Ker Conway is a child of the Australian outback in the mid-twentieth century. Born in 1934, Conway's infancy occurs during the Great Depression, which strikes Australia hard. Her adolescence coincides with World War II and the post-war period during the later 1940s. Her perspective is heavily rooted in her time and place. First, Conway grows up with a deep passion for nature, people, social structures and history. She loves the backcountry people and as an adult decides to vindicate their importance in Australian history in her work.

Conway's political attitudes hew a line between the patriotism of the right and the negative assessment of Australian history as one of imperialism characteristic of the left. Conway spends a lot of time changing her perspective on her home life from one of pure adoration to one concerned that her family had benefitted from the exploitation of the land and labor of others. In the end, however, she believes that her country's history is mostly a good one. Conway, while not religious, is fairly friendly to spirituality in the book and once considers conversion to Christianity a live option. She is also deeply sympathetic to her mother's ardent feminism, pursuing an academic education when it is unusual for her and enduring unjust discrimination based on her gender.

Conway is always attached to her family and spends most of her young life with them as hard primary sources of human contact, to the point where she does not meet a girl her age until she is seven. Conway loves hard work in the bush and sometimes finds city life alienating. She considers herself a true Australian, liable to feel foreign anywhere else she goes.

Tone

The tone of the Road from Coorain varies between the time periods that Conway describes. The tone is somewhat sad at the beginning of the book when Conway describes how her mother was unhappy initially at Coorain and how hard her parents had to struggle to make Coorain profitable during the Great Depression. However, once the financial fortunes of Coorain turn around and Conway is old enough to recall life at her younger ages, the tone livens considerably. Conway was clearly happy, talking about hard work in the fields, reading on her own, planting flowers, playing with her brothers and learning from the farm hands.

Not surprisingly the tone turns increasingly dark as the drought progresses and when Conway's father dies the tone turns pitch black and never wholly recovers as the rest of Conway's life in the book occurs against the backdrop of a family tragedy that her mother lets ruin her life, bit by bit. Conway's attitudes towards her mother are sometimes loving and sympathetic but sometimes have a biting and resentful tone,

even cold in places. In contrast, Conway always speaks lovingly of her brothers in everything they did.

The tone of the book during Conway's school years is increasingly bright, save when Conway is discriminated against in her application to the Department of External Affairs. Conway becomes increasingly immersed in the world of ideas and loves it more and more. That said, the tone turns darker at the end as it becomes clear to Conway that dealing with her mother has becoming unmanageable and that she must leave. Her departure to the United States is somewhat muted in tone.

Structure

The Road from Coorain has a simple and straightforward chronological structure. The book begins by introducing Conway's parents, how they met, married and came to Coorain and then explains their sons and Conway's own birth. The book has nine chapters that are divided into themes and periods but, again, the themes are structured is simple order.

Chapter 1, "The West" is the introduction to the book. It begins with an extended description of the geography, foliage and animal life of the bush and the local social environment. Chapter 2, "Coorain", introduces Conway's family and Coorain, with all the details of her parents' lives and the development of Coorain. Chapter 3, "Childhood", is the story of Conway's childhood until she is seven when the drought begins. Chapter 4, "Drought", is a major turning point in the Road from Coorain. Until then, the book gradually picks up as Coorain flourishes, with little interruption. However, Chapter 4 is a steady decline that contains Conway's father's death (a probable suicide) along with the Ker family's grief.

Chapter 5, "Schooling", moves the Ker family to Sydney and explains Conway's schooling at Abbotsleigh along with the associated family events. It is in this chapter that Bob dies. Chapter 6, "Finding the Southern Cross", is the story of Conway's aimlessness after graduating from high school and finding her own path. Chapter 7, "The Nardoo Stones", shows Conway focus on school and her developing ideas and her love for ideas touching on her struggle against sexism. Chapter 8, "Recharting the Globe", describes Conway's trip to England and Europe with her mother and how the trip changes her perspective on Australia.

Chapter 9, "The Right Country", has Conway come into her own and settle on her purpose in life while also realizing that her mother would probably die in the same dysfunctional psychological state that she was at the time and that Conway could do nothing but extricate herself from that relationship. The book ends as Conway travels to Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Quotes

"Human purposes are dwarfed by such a blank horizon." (Chapter 1, 5)

"On regular nights there were only the stars, the cry of a fox, and the sounds of the wind." (Chapter 1, 15)

"My father was elated as he surveyed the realization of his dream to own land and to raise his own flocks of sheep and cattle. For my mother, not born to the bush, my father's long-dreamed-of property was a nightmare of desolation." (Chapter 2, 18)

"Here, pressed into the earth by the weight of that enormous sky, there is real peace. To those who know it, the annihilation of self, subsumed into the vast emptiness of nature, is akin to a religious experience." (Chapter 2, 25)

"But no war was ever really just because of the pain and suffering inflicted not only on soldiers, but on civilians. We should work for a world where there were other ways of settling conflicts. It was wrong for so many generations of you men to be killed." (Chapter 3, 44)

"All in all, what might on the surface appear like a lonely childhood, especially after the departure of my brothers, was one filled with interest, stimulation, and friends." (Chapter 3, 50)

"When I'm gone, Jill, sell this place. Take care of your mother. Make sure she goes to the city." (Chapter 4, 64)

"I want you to help me. Your father's dead. He was working on extending the piping into the Brooklins dam. We found him there in the water." (Chapter 4, 72)

"You ought to leave here. There's not a bloody thing you two can do here now." (Chapter 4, 77)

"At Abbotsleigh, even though I was immediately ushered into a classroom of thirty-six strangers, it seemed as though I had already arrived in paradise." (Chapter 5, 97)

"Postwar Australia was a society transformed by the economic stimulus of the Second World War. In contrast to the cautious mentality inherited by the generation shaped by the Depression, we were agog with the excitement of prosperity." (Chapter 5, 109)

"I regret to inform you that at approximately 11:40 p.m., there was an accident to the vehicle in which Robert Ker was a passenger. He was thrown from the vehicle, suffered severe head injuries, and was taken to Penrith Hospital. He died there at 1:53 a.m." (Chapter 5, 118)

"I often watched the Southern Cross in the night sky, but it was not just a compass bearing I needed now, it was a judgment about what would be the moral path to choose." (Chapter 6, 151)

"Better still was my inner feeling that I had found something I could do well, and my new awareness that university study was about learning and reflection, not the cramming of texts and information. Now I had a purpose in life." (Chapter 7, 168)

"I was headed for a traumatic confrontation between ambition, love, and duty." (Chapter 7, 187)

"Now I understood directly and personally what injustice rooted in assumptions of biological superiority meant, I could see with sudden clarity what our use of the nardoo stones signified. As it came home to me that my sex rendered my merits invisible, I thought differently about the way we had taken over the aborigines' land. It chilled me to realize that there was no way to earn my freedom through merit. It was an appalling prospect." (Chapter 7, 192)

"I knew now what I was going to do. I was going home to study history. It was no use pretending that I wasn't a scholar." (Chapter 8, 209)

"I couldn't believe it; I'd found a man who respected my work and shared my exacting standards about it." (Chapter 9, 227)

"She was born in the right country." (Chapter 9, 232)

"I was a woman who wanted to do serious work and have it make a difference. I wanted to think about Australia in a way that made everyone else uncomfortable. I loved my native earth passionately and was going into emotional exile. ... I was going to another country, to begin all over again." (Chapter 9, 236)

"Then I comforted myself with the notion that wherever on the earth was my final resting place, my body would return to the restless red dust of the western plains. I could see how it would blow about and get in people's eyes, and I was content with that." (Chapter 9, 238)

Topics for Discussion

Explain the dynamic between Conway's parents differing (a) geographical upbringings, (b) social class, and (c) religion and how it affected their lives together.

How did the drought at Coorain affect Conway's father? How does it relate to his probable suicide?

How did Conway's mother handle her father's death? To what extent was her response unhealthy?

How did Conway figure out that she was going to study history?

In what way did Conway have an unhealthy relationship with her mother?

Explain the various manifestations of spirituality and religion in the book. Give three examples and explain how they were integrated into the story.

How did Bob's death affect Conway? Barry? Conway's mother?

Why did Conway decide to leave her mother in Sydney and go to the United States?