

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

for

A SERIES OF SMALL MANEUVERS

1. The word "river" is a noun and is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as "a large natural flow of water that crosses an area of land and goes into an ocean, a lake, etc." But Emma's father, Parker, also thinks of the word "river" as a verb. What does he mean by this? According to Parker, to "river" is to do what?
2. Emma's father once told her that anything he ever learned he learned on a river. When she asks for an example, Emma says that her father lamely replied, "Go with the flow." Why does Emma call her father's reply lame in this case? What does Parker mean by "go with the flow"?
3. When betting on whether the Rio Tinto will go up or down overnight, Emma's father explains his bet to Emma by saying that he's following the river's trend. When Emma rightly points out that he's always told her not to follow trends and to be an individual, her father makes a distinction and says he's not following, but paralleling, which is different. "Instead of walking behind," he says, "it's like walking side by side." What do you think? Is Parker right? Is there a difference between being a trend paralleler and not just a trend follower, or is he simply trying to talk his way out of a contradiction?
4. The philosopher Heraclitus's idea that you can never step in the same river twice is repeated several times throughout the novel, including the conversation Emma and Dan have after Parker's funeral service. In that conversation, Emma is talking about returning home and insists that Heraclitus's idea doesn't apply in this case. Dan disagrees. Why? What does he mean when he says, "You are always meeting the present"?
5. Masks are brought up several times in the novel. What are some of Parker's ideas about masks? Does Emma feel the same way as her father?

6. In the opening chapters of the novel, Emma explains to Sheriff Mendoza what happened to her on the river. Discuss how her sense of guilt influences the details of her story.
7. What does the scene at the rest area tell us about Emma's state of mind and her relationship with her mother?
8. Emma doesn't connect well with the therapist Roland, but she also admits that he has his moments. What are some of the insights Emma gleans from Roland? What does she mean when she comments that he "just didn't know how to say it right"?
9. Discuss whether or not Emma's experience affords her some celebrity status. How does this help or hinder her grieving?
10. During the ambulance ride out of Piedra Gulch, Emma and Alex talk about the different results they've received on career aptitude tests. What do you think about these kinds of tests? Are people really, as Alex states, "as predictable as fish"? Do you agree with Alex's parents, who tell her that, "it didn't matter what you did for a living ... the important thing was how you lived"?
11. Discuss the different ways Emma feels about adventure and the outdoors at various times throughout the book. Do you think her feelings about these things will remain the same throughout her life?
12. Do you think Parker is proud of Emma?
13. In her postcard to Emma, Alex tells her to be safe but to also be wild. What does Alex mean by "wild" in this case? Can one be both safe and wild?
14. At the end of the novel, Emma wants to erase the picture on the van's taillight, but instead she decides to redraw it. What are the differences between the two actions? What does it mean that Emma makes the choice that she does?
15. What is one thing that you would have done differently from Emma, either on or off the river? Why would you have made that choice?

