

Pigs Can't Swim

A Memoir

Helen Peppe

For Discussion

1. Peppe identifies most locations by descriptions, and most people by characteristics (Blustery-and-favored Brother, Sister-who-holds-grudges-longer-than-God, Hair-twirling-pretty sister, tough-yet-admirable sister, Sad-tittering sister, and Sister of poor choices). Did this help you connect to the characters better?
2. Helen is an oddity in the family. She is the youngest, a vegetarian, an avid reader, and an animal lover. How do her siblings and parents treat her and communicate with her because of these differences?
3. We are shown a detailed view of rural Maine. The description comes from a child's perspective that is often light-hearted and humorous. Does the humor hide the depressing nature of how the family lives? Does the parents' love for their children outweigh the moments of neglect?
4. Helen is always immersed in a book and mentions that the fictional worlds of Stephen King always seemed so much safer than her own reality. What was it about her own reality that seemed so unsafe to her?
5. Peppe creates an insular world for her family, and only when the outside world intrudes do problems emerge. If this is the case, why are Helen and her siblings always trying to escape?
6. The title, *Pigs Can't Swim*, relates to Waterboro, the pig her brother picks up on their road trip. Even after the family sees Waterboro swimming, they still decide pigs can't swim. What does that show about the family?
7. Throughout the first half of the book, the tone is humorous and the child's perspective provides an innocent view of a life she has yet to question. As darker experiences are described—the hair-twirling-pretty sister's abusive relationship and Helen's molestation—the tone shifts. Did you notice this shift? How does the tone throughout relate to Helen's resilience?
8. Freedom is a main theme. The siblings are constantly trying to find ways to escape. Dakota provides Helen with physical freedom, books provide a mental escape, and Eric provides companionship

About the Author

Helen Peppe, writer and photographer, lives near Portland, Maine, with her two children, four dogs, eight rescued rabbits, four guinea pigs, and two destructive kittens.