

Questions for Discussion

The Blackberry Bush by David Housholder

Great to work through alone; best in a group, book club, or classroom setting.

Level Two: Going Deeper

1. Josh and Kati were born in very dramatic historical times of great change. What are the special challenges of the generation born around 1990? What are their special advantages?

Is this your generation? If so, what does the rest of the population misunderstand about your age group?

2. Linda and Konrad in Germany, and Janine and Michael in California were giving birth when the Wall came down in 1989. Where were you when the Berlin Wall fell (if you were alive at the time)?

Are you familiar with the geography of Cold War Europe? Have you heard the term *Iron Curtain*? If so, what does it mean to you? How would life have differed on each side of “the Wall”?

3. Kati and Josh struggle with finding freedom in their lives. Do you believe in predestination? Are there multiple possible futures or only one? If there is a God who knows the future, can there really be more than one possible future?

What do the following words mean to you: *fate, destiny, determinism*?

4. Where were you during the World Trade Center attack (if you were alive at the time)? What do you remember thinking and feeling? What two or three things have changed for everyone since then? Have we, as a society, regained our balance since then? Why or why not?

5. Josh loved to skateboard, surf, and snowboard. How much of this do you think was a reaction against his father's more conventional sports life, and how much was genuinely because he loved those sports? Why is it hard to tell where our preferences come from for doing what we do?

6. Kati and Josh were raised, as children, going to church. What are the upsides and downsides of such a childhood? Why do you think this seems to be declining in the Western World? Is that good or bad for society?

7. Kati and Josh both attended some lively churches. What is the most interesting church you've attended (if you've been to one)? Why? What makes the difference between a church that is "alive" and one that is "dead"? What one thing could a church change to make you want to come back?

8. Josh develops his ability to be present in "lucid" dreams while he is asleep. Are you aware that you are dreaming while it's happening? Explain, using your own experience.

9. Nellie faces hatred and brutality at the "tar and feather" incident. For those of you who have never experienced such an event, is it hard to believe that these things really happen? Do you think all human beings possess the potential for brutality given the right conditions? Why or why not? Could you picture yourself becoming part of a mob like the one that attacked Nellie? Explain.

10. Kati struggled with alcohol abuse. Why do you think "church people" have a hard time talking about alcohol? Many of them just edit all references to it out of their language. Since Jesus made copious amounts of wine at the wedding in Cana, why do his followers today have such a fixation on alcohol as a negative thing? If you are in a church, how do you handle discussions of alcohol as a group?

11. Do you speak other languages? Do you have extended family members who have first languages other than English? Do you think more people will become at least bilingual in the future? Why or why not?

12. Zarzamora is the one fictional city in the novel. It's in California. Look up the literary roots for California's name. California is the world center for media and popular storytelling. Do you think this has been a good thing or a bad thing for the world? Explain.

13. Walter and Nellie defied family, morals, and national ethics—but good came of their poor choices eventually. What's the best thing you've seen come out of something that started out wrong? Tell the story.

14. Both Nellie and Josh (at different moments in the book) crossed the line and deliberately chose to do something that most of us would consider wrong. It was not just a "mistake" in either case. Are you comfortable talking to others about deliberate ethical "felonies" you've committed, or do you keep such things to yourself? Why?

15. Kati faced drowning at the Cliffs. What's the closest you've come to death? Did you bargain with God? Tell the story.

16. In the epilogue, both Josh and Kati have large families of their own, but they come from family lines with very few children. Do you think families can get too small? Would children be better adjusted, in general, with more siblings or with less? Explain your reasoning.

17. How have your parents' dreams for you influenced you for the good and for the bad throughout your life thus far? If you are an adult, how has your relationship with your parents changed since your growing-up days?

18. Kati's volunteering with the kids at the church led to her adult vocation. When have you seen your own—or anyone else's—"avocation" turn into a career?

19. This book has a lot of Christian content. Does that make it, in your mind, a “Christian book”? Or is it just literature with Christian themes? Would you recommend it to your local high school for an English class reading list? Why or why not? Do you think we can have books with spiritual content in the public marketplace, or do they have to be “sanitized”? Explain.

20. Kati’s Opa Harald states that we “are in the presence of a God who speaks.” Have you ever received a message, in any form, that you believe was from God? How do you think God prefers communicating with us?

21. Has a minor event in your life ever led to a whole new destiny? If so, share the story.

22. Saahir calls Jesus “Isa.” Are there different names out there for the same God, or do different names denote totally different realities? Can any faith system claim to be exclusively genuine? Is it really possible to say that all faith systems are the same?

23. For Josh and Kati, their faith came alive as the story went on. What do you think it means to be “saved,” and when do you think each of them, if you believe they did, crossed that line? Is salvation a process or an event? Is it possible to say “yes” to a lot of truths about God without being “saved?”

24. Which of your ancestors was carrying a torch of faith for the family? Was it passed on to you, or do you have to light your own? Explain.

25. Of everyone in your sphere of influence—family, friends, coworkers, and neighbors—which one person would benefit most from reading this story? Why do you think that?

Then pass it along!