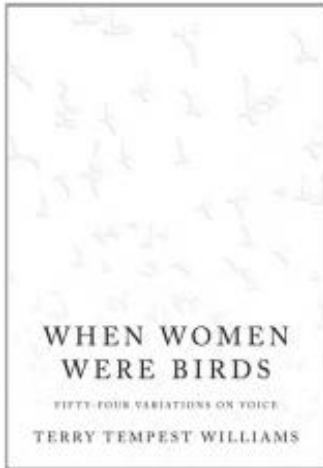

When Women Were Birds: Fifty-four Variations on Voice

by Terry Tempest Williams



About the Book

Terry Tempest Williams's unconventional, beloved memoir **Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place** paid homage to Williams's mother, who developed cancer as a result of nuclear testing in nearby Nevada. Her mother told her, "I am leaving you all my journals. But you must promise me that you will not look at them until after I am gone." Williams easily found the three shelves of beautiful cloth-bound diaries, but she soon discovered that all the books were blank. A stirring meditation on the messages conveyed in those seemingly empty pages, **When Women Were Birds** explores the shaping of a life through fifty-four precisely honed chapters, each with its own unique wisdom. Through evocative scenes, captured in lyrical words, Williams has created a work that startles and illuminates.

The discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your reading group's experience of **When Women Were Birds**. We hope they will enrich your journey.

Discussion Guide

1. Terry Tempest Williams describes the gifts of her relationships with her mother, Diane, and grandmother Mimi. What legacies have been passed to you by the women in your family?
2. Discuss the beauty and symbolism of birds, including the various birds described in the book, from the owl to the falcon to the thrush and the bunting. What would your life look like if you could "fly"? What songs would you sing at dawn and dusk?

3. **When Women Were Birds** explores the power of silence and emptiness, with analogies that include John Cage's music and Robert Rauschenberg's **White Paintings**. How did you interpret Diane's blank journals? What does your interpretation say about you? Which of Williams's many interpretations resonates with you the most?
4. In chapter 31, Williams reveals that a man named Joseph terrorized her when she was a teaching assistant in the Sawtooth Wilderness of Idaho. How would you answer the questions she poses in that chapter: What are the consequences when we go against our instincts? What are the consequences of not speaking out? What are the consequences of guilt, shame, and doubt?
5. The owners of the Jeffs school forbade Williams to practice environmentalism or teach biology. How did Williams develop the courage to become an activist, despite so many restrictions on her freedom early in her career? What factors lead to engagement, personal as well as political?
6. Discuss the landscapes that Williams calls home. What are the patterns that connect throughout the book regarding our relationship toward place? What different meanings do Utah and New York have for her? The desert and the sea? How does home contribute to voice?
7. What role does the Mormon church play in Williams's life? How is her depiction of the LDS religion and its influence different from others you've seen?
8. How is Williams transformed by her night in jail (chapter 41)? What common threads run through the factors she lists: suspended license, no money for the fine, thinking she can cope with being locked up for just one night, believing that she deserves to be punished? Imprisonment and freedom are parallel themes within **When Women Were Birds**. Where else does this imagery emerge?
9. Shadow and light loom large in **When Women Were Birds**. Williams also appreciates the Japanese greeting "How is your honorable shadow?" and recounts Strauss's opera *Die Frau Ohne Schatten* (**The Woman Without a Shadow**). How do these echoes of identity and psychological inquiry come to life in the book?
10. How does Williams's relationship with her father compare to your own relationship with your dad? What did her father teach her about men?
11. What does the book say about the experience of solitude versus being in partnership? How would you describe Terry and Brooke's marriage? What levels of self-awareness does Williams receive from Brooke and Louis? How does her definition of love develop throughout her lifetime?
12. How was your reading affected by the book's form and design, with passages enough to carry you through a year and chapters that bear unique, variable patterns? What do these precise pieces create as a whole?
13. In chapter 54 (both versions of it, LIV and LIV[E]), Williams must face the uncertainty (of mysteries) of mortality, but she acknowledges the empty page that accompanies the start of each new day. What inspiration do you take from these scenes? How can the book help readers reclaim a voice?

14. What is the relationship between voice and silence? What do you think Williams meant when she said, "If only my mother had known I was her sister instead of her daughter"?

15. Discuss this book's relationship to Williams's previous books that you have read, particularly **Refuge**. In what ways might this book be its sequel? How has Williams's voice changed throughout the years? How do you see your own voice evolving? Collectively, what freedoms do Terry Tempest Williams's writings provide?

Author Bio

A Utah native, Terry Tempest Williams is celebrated for her natural history writing. Her intimate connection with nature is expressed through her representation of the Utah wilderness. Williams grew up near the Great Salt Lake and is the sixth generation of a Mormon family whose men have laid pipes in the state's earth. Her religion is as much a part of her work as her womanhood and her location; the Mormon faith is responsible for incorporating respect for the land and community with respect for God. The author's connection with Utah is so great that it pains her to leave home in order to make public appearances.

One of Terry's most well known books, *REFUGE*, describes the rising level of the Great Salt Lake and the destruction of bird habitat as a backdrop to coping with her mother's decline from breast cancer. Williams's six aunts, mother and grandmother all had mastectomies, and their cancer is believed to have been a result of living downwind from nuclear testing. The author captures the essence of change in the environment, change in people as a result of their environment, and the need for humans to change their relationship with the Earth. Williams believes that we need to identify ourselves as one among the species of the planet and not the one to dominate over all other life forms.

In person, Ms. Williams is down to earth and reaches out to the public. She supports the efforts of the Wilderness Society and the Women, Health, and Environment Network in addressing environmental and feminist concerns. In 1995, Terry spoke before a Senate subcommittee hearing on the Utah Public Land Management Act. Opposing Senate Bill 884, she encouraged more wilderness preservation in Utah. Ms. Williams has been a naturalist at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge and the Utah Museum of Natural History. Presently, she is the Shirley Sutton Thomas Visiting Professor of English at the University of Utah. She resides in Salt Lake City, Utah, with her husband Brooke.

Critical Praise

"**When Women Were Birds** is a wise and beautiful and intelligent book, written for the women, men, and children of our times. It vibrates with the earned honesty of a great soul. It is a gift, passed on to readers with the same spirit of love and generosity with which it was first given to the author by her mother. A remarkable journey, a remarkable story."

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