

Wilderness Tips (1991)

Discussion Questions

The reiteration of several of Atwood's key themes in these stories should provide interest in how they work individually and in relation to one another. It is worth considering how the short story differs from the novel and what unique opportunities it accords a writer like Atwood who also works quite well in the more spacious fictional form. Similarly, we might ask if there are places in Atwood's prose where her talents as a poet are prominent.

1. What are the strengths of the short story as a literary form? What can it do especially well and what can it not do? How would you evaluate Atwood's use of the form? Does she illuminate possibilities you had not appreciated before?
2. There is a distinctively middle-aged world view informing these stories. What questions emerge as people pass the midpoint of their lives? Which characters show themselves preoccupied with such questions, and with what effect on their lives in the present?
3. What do you make of Lucy's disappearance in "Death by Landscape"? How would you define her presence in the story? Why has she been able to haunt Lois's imagination?
4. George in "Wilderness Tips" offers a psychological contrast with the sophisticated and comfortable members of his wife's family—why does he continue to stand out among them after so many years? What is the basis of his identification with the family patriarch? What "wilderness tips" did he pick up from the world he left behind and the world to which he now belongs? What does one have to do with the other?
5. What is the nature of the battle of the sexes in "Wilderness Tips"? How do men and women relate to each other? What do sex, power, and love have to do with one another in this story and the histories of the characters?
6. Idealism and pragmatism are regularly juxtaposed in these pieces. In what contexts do protagonists face the struggle between the competing world views they represent? How do they respond? Do these stories offer some larger commentary on that conflict?
7. As an artist, Atwood regularly challenges her readers to question the uses and abuses of art in our time. What insights into art's role in culture do either of these stories offer?