

TOUCH AND GO

By Thad Nodine

Discussion Guide

About This Book

Kevin's family is anything but orthodox, made up of his caretaker Isa, her husband Patrick (both recovering addicts, like Kevin), and their two foster kids Devon and Ray. To complicate things further, Kevin has always had a crush on Isa, and her affection for him often sends him mixed messages. But it's a family nonetheless, one he's chosen. And Kevin, a blind writer, is unconventional himself.

When this jumbled family takes off from their home in California to visit Isa's dying father in Florida, their fragile balance quickly deteriorates. Isa's emotional state becomes less and less stable, and a run-in with her estranged brother and his family only makes things worse. Patrick can't hold his temper, runs afoul of the law, and is constantly searching for quick get-rich schemes to pay off his debts. Kevin begins to doubt his attachment to Isa and his place in the family, straining his previous closeness with Ray and Devon.

Patrick insists on a side trip to Biloxi, to visit his own parents. When they arrive, the situation boils over thanks to the revelation that Devon is Patrick's biological son, and the onset of Hurricane Katrina. As they fight to survive, Devon fights to come to grips with his anger at Patrick, and Isa and Patrick are lost in the storm. In the aftermath, Kevin has to figure out how to make things right -- for Ray and Devon, and for himself.

Discussion Questions

1. While *Touch and Go* is told entirely from Kevin's perspective, there is a full cast of strong characters. Whom did you find the most sympathetic and/or interesting, and whom the least?
2. Did you get used to experiencing things through Kevin? Was his blindness more noticeable in certain portions of the book than others?
3. The family relationships are quite complicated in *Touch and Go*, with overlap between families of choice and biological families. Are there dramatic differences in the way they function? Compare, for example, Isa's brother Robert's family with her own. Are there any functional families in the novel at all?

4. Kevin is neither a foster or biological parent to Ray or Devon, but despite that takes a strong role with them. Is he a better “parent” than Isa or Patrick?
5. The road-trip is a disaster from the start, thanks to Patrick’s irate and erratic behavior. Were you surprised at how quickly things went wrong, or did you expect it?
6. Did you suspect at any point that Patrick and Devon were related? If so, what tipped you off?
7. We experience Katrina through Kevin’s perspective, entirely lacking in visuals except as reported by the other characters. Discuss the reading experience -- was it more visceral? Harder to imagine, or easier?
8. Several times during the storm Kevin tries to help people from the neighboring houses, and each time he is almost lost himself. Why does he keep trying? Is he deluded to think he can be useful in this way?
9. Did Isa jump or fall? What do you think she really said?
10. Kevin notes feeling upset that the national media coverage is so focused on New Orleans, and ignores other locations like Biloxi. Can you name other cities affected? *The New York Times* has a set of interactive maps and albums of areas damaged by the hurricane (http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/national/2005_HURRICANEKATRINA_GRAPHIC/) -- are you surprised by any of the information presented?
11. Both the Landrys and Abe Gibbons (Isa’s father) are eager to help Devon. Is Patrick’s disappearance a boon for his son? Would things be different if Patrick and Isa hadn’t been lost in the storm?
12. Have you read any other novels written from a blind perspective? Consider representations of the blind in literature/pop culture; how do they match up with the author’s portrayal of Kevin? How do they differ?

Addendum: Other Blind Characters in Fiction

- Homer in *Homer & Langley* (E.L. Doctorow)
- Sammy in *How Late It Was, How Late* (James Kelman)
- Teresa in *How to Paint a Dead Man* (Sarah Hall)
- Robert in *Cathedral* (Raymond Carver)
- Homer Barbee in *Invisible Man* (Ralph Ellison)
- Jorge in *Name of the Rose* (Umberto Eco)
- Johnny in *Johnny Got His Gun* (Dalton Trumbo)