



The Red-Headed Pilgrim

Kevin Maloney

Reader Guide: Questions and Topics for Discussion

1. The epigraph for the novel is a quote from Carl Jung in which he reflects on John Bunyan's famous 17th century allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and the title, *The Red-Headed Pilgrim*, alludes to a pilgrimage as well. What comes to mind for you with the idea of a "pilgrim"? How do the title and the epigraph set a fitting tone for this story?
2. This book presents itself as a novel, but the main character shares a name and biographical details with the author. How did this impact your experience of the text? Did you read it as an autobiographical account? How would you have experienced this novel if the author and narrator's names were different? Discuss whether you believe it matters what genre (novel, memoir, autofiction...) a book is labeled as belonging to.
3. In the Prologue, the narrator has an existential crisis in an office park in the suburbs. How does this set the stage for what follows? Do you relate to the protagonist's fear of complacency?
4. Early in the novel, Kevin's spiritual journey begins when his psychologist gives him a copy of *Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse. What role do books play in *The Red-Headed Pilgrim*? To what extent is Kevin's education institutional vs. self-directed?
5. In high school, teenage Kevin starts a club called "The Inevitable Death Society." How does the fear of death inform Kevin's journey? Does Kevin have a realistic or idealized understanding of mortality?
6. In *The Red-Headed Pilgrim*, Kevin's parents send him to an expensive private university. Later, they fund his whimsical backpacker vacation to Europe. Does the protagonist seem aware of his privilege? How does his privilege inform his experiences in adulthood as an employee and father? How do we reconcile his hardships in the context of his privilege?

7. In mythology and contemporary narrative, the hero's journey is a common format involving a hero who has adventures, overcomes obstacles, and returns home victorious and transformed. How does this text engage or reject the traditions of the hero's journey? How do external forces, such as capitalism and gender roles, affect the protagonist's progress?
8. Why the focus on the narrator's hair color? Is there something distinctive about the red-headed identity we can learn from this story? In discussing his appearance, the writer does not focus on his race, height, or other physical attributes much or at all. Why is this story specifically focused on life as a ginger?
9. In Chapter 9, Kevin takes up residence at a Wild West-themed roadside attraction called Frontier Village. Later, we find him wearing a cowboy hat, fantasizing about an imagined past working as a ranch hand. What role do the ideas and imagery of the American West play in the novel? In what ways does the novel utilize or subvert the tropes of early American lore?
10. Role models for our protagonist tend to be male thinkers and artists, yet female figures act as teachers throughout this story and propel the plot forward. Ranging from mother figures to lovers and a daughter, among others, how do we see the role of women impacting this story? What conclusions can we draw, if any, about the competing influences of masculine and feminine sensibilities upon the protagonist's identity?
11. The majority of the novel takes place in a world before smartphones and social media. How would Kevin's journey be different if it took place today?
12. Were there specific images in the novel that you found memorable, striking, evocative, or surprising? How was Maloney able to achieve this? What techniques of craft does the author employ to create a visually compelling world?
13. Many passages of the novel focus on sexual desire, anxiety, frustration, and fulfillment. At times, Maloney's sexual preoccupations cloud his judgment but also bring him the gift of Zoë. How does sexuality function within the novel as a whole? Does Maloney's sexual journey serve as a metaphor for the many obstacles on his path from suffering toward enlightenment? Is his sexual awakening a helpful tool in his journey?
14. In Part III, Kevin's journey comes to an abrupt halt when he gets his girlfriend pregnant. In what ways is Kevin the Young Seeker still present in Kevin the Parent? In what ways does he successfully make the transition to parent and in what ways does he fail?
15. *The Red-Headed Pilgrim* is hyper-focused on the protagonist's journey and how he sees himself. What role does point-of-view play in the novel? How would the novel be different if it were told from Wendy's perspective? Zoë's?

16. Think of some famous fathers in movies, TV, and novels. How does the protagonist resemble these characters? How is he different? Is the novel's depiction of Kevin as a single father sympathetic? Can we draw any conclusions about the differing struggles faced by mothers and fathers?
17. Despite the chaos of her home life, Zoë emerges as a precocious, intelligent child. What role does Zoë play in her family? Who do we imagine Zoë will become in adulthood?
18. This first-person narration vacillates between chronological account and backward glance. Do these shifts in time serve the narrator's attempt to reckon with his past? Does this selective memory serve another function? How is your understanding of the story and its themes enhanced by shifts between past and present?
19. What role do drugs and alcohol play in the novel? Are they a help or hindrance on Kevin's journey to adulthood? How does the protagonist's own view of their use change over time?
20. The tone of the novel is buoyantly humorous and playful, making use of the narrator's delusions, his memorable foils, and the absurd to keep us laughing. Yet key interludes offer wistful reflection and melancholy. Discuss how the tension between these modes serves the novel and its themes. Do tonal shifts correlate with the treatment of time? What can we learn from charting our narrator's reliance upon humor and the moments when he abandons it?