

## Reader's Guide & Book Group Questions for *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*

by Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg

An October, 2009, Midwest Connections Pick

**Q:** The author begins by writing, "I don't know who I am as a body anymore." What does this book say about who she, or any of us are, as bodies?

**Q:** When diagnosed with cancer, the author tells most of her family and friends immediately. What benefit does she derive from this openness about her cancer, and also, what disadvantages are there to sharing her information so freely?

**Q:** Throughout the book, the author makes connections between her health crisis and environmental issues. What do these connections reveal about the source of disease and environmental degradation and also what we can find in our own healing by turning to the earth and sky around us?

**Q:** Throughout the book, the author draws on mainstream medical treatment as well as alternative healing approaches. How do these different approaches work together for the author, and what does the author's experience say about blending such approaches?

**Q:** How does the author use humor to convey her experience with cancer and community?

**Q:** Why is this book titled *The Sky Begins At Your Feet*?

**Q:** What does the author and her family discover about the ramifications of having the BRCA genetic mutation?

**Q:** One of the central decisions the author makes is whether or not to have breast reconstruction. Why does she decide to forego the surgery, and what pressures and possibilities does she face along the way to making that decision?

**Q:** The author writes of denial in the beginning of the book quite a bit – from seeing the cancer as if it's something a good friend of hers has rather than herself to strategizing to avoid chemo by having her ovaries removed. How does denial serve the author in the early stages of dealing with a difficult diagnosis, and how can such denial be beneficial at times for people living with cancer?

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**Q:** In looking at her life, the author writes in the first chapter, “I could say I was an expert packer. I could pack up the back of our van for a camping trip, squeezing odd-shaped bags or angular coolers together without an inch of space wasted. I did the same with my time.” What does the author learn through her experience with cancer about packing her time so tightly, and what does this book say in general about how to inhabit our own schedules?

**Q:** The author writes of her father asking, “Do you recognize me?” What could this question mean?

**Q:** In writing about grief and the loss of a parent, the author writes, “Since I was so lost, it somehow made sense that the only place to be was simply at the end of the world, in Key West, where the earth stopped in the middle of vast and unfathomable ocean. A new kind of night, with its dark, windy, lingering warmth, wrapped around me.” What does this statement say about grief and the loss of a parent?

**Q:** Why does the author name the chapter about traveling to see her dying father “Spirit Trip”?

**Q:** Why did the author say that the way her father died was a gift to her? How did this gift begin to change her life?

**Q:** Besides receiving ample support from her cancer support group of close friends, what other value does the support group give the author?

**Q:** What does this memoir say about building and keeping community?

**Q:** What does this memoir suggest about what to tell and not tell children when a parent faces cancer?

**Q:** The author asks, at several points in the book, “How do I sing the body erotic?” What does she mean when describing her search for a new sense of the erotic?

**Q:** Caryn Mirriam-Goldberg is a long-time poet and the Kansas Poet Laureate for 2009-2011. How do you see her experience as a poet in the writing style of this book?

**Q:** What does this book say about bioregionalism – the movement based on learning from where you live how to live in greater balance with the earth and community?

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**Q:** At the end of the chapter, “Crying Women,” the author writes, “I was okay, but I also realized I had gained this new peripheral vision. Everything was lit from within in its unpredictability, in its magic too. Tears of pain and fear, and tears of joy and freedom – no difference between them at times.” What does this statement mean in and beyond the context of this book?

**Q:** The author writes, in the epilogue, “Since my cancer treatment ended, two conflicting impulses have been released into my bloodstream: to hold tight to the wider view of life that cancer gave me, and to get as much done as possible, because who knows when I’ll die.” How does she navigate these opposing impulses in the years since her initial diagnosis, and what does this statement say about how people live with their mortality.

**Q:** What does this book suggest as the most values in our lives: how we live, what we do with our time, how we relate to others and the earth, what we’re alive to do? Do you agree with those values, and/or do you have other values you would add to the list?

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