

Down from the Mountain

Discussion Guide for the book by Elizabeth Fixmer

FOR DISCUSSION

1. A **CULT** is defined at dictionary.com as: “a religion or sect considered to be false, unorthodox, or extremist, with members often living outside of conventional society under the direction of a charismatic leader.” After reading *Down from the Mountain*, what do you believe characterizes a **RELIGIOUS CULT**? How is a **RELIGIOUS CULT** different from an organized formal religion? Would members of the Righteous Path consider themselves a **CULT**?
2. Define **DISENFRANCHISE**? How does Ezekiel’s knowledge of the **DISENFRANCHISED** allow him to entice followers into his fold?
3. In what ways does Ezekiel exert **POWER** over his Righteous Path disciples in order to **CONTROL** them? How does Ezekiel respond when his **POWER** is threatened? Consider how he uses:
 - dissemination of information** (p. 18) “Now the only books we have besides the Bible are textbooks. And they have a lot of things blacked out or ripped out so we only learn God’s truth.”
 - naming** (p. 58) “...Eva was the new name he gave me right when we got there. But I liked my real name, Lily.”
 - punishment** (p. 59) When Ezekiel demands that Eva give up her necklace, she says, “He paddled me hard until I gave it to him. That’s when I wet myself in front of everybody.”
 - food** (p. 68) “... if we had more money for food, we probably would fast less often.”
 - money** (p. 70) “All money, no matter how it is obtained, belongs to Righteous Path.”
 - clothing** (pp. 105-111) recall the scene where “heathen” clothes are bought for Eva and Rachel to wear to town
 - fear** (p. 114) “This is the way it is when Ezekiel’s in a bad place – fear tramples any loving feeling.”
 - shaming** (pp. 115-117) when Ezekiel cuts Eva’s hair off, he says “Let the shame of this help you change. I believe you are capable of becoming the obedient girl you’re called to be.”
 - isolation** (p. 137) Trevor tells Eva, “You’ve been so sheltered that you don’t know anything about other people’s beliefs.”
 - medical attention** (pp. 207-208) “It’s the feeling I squelched when Jacob lost his front teeth at the hands of his father when he tried to protect his mother. Ezekiel had said to pray for a miracle, and God might let his front teeth grow back. I prayed like crazy. We all did. But he never grew new teeth.”
 - secrets and lies** (pp. 213 – 214) Think about what Eva has been told about her father and the truth that she later learned from the article she found in the *Chicago Tribune*.
 - language** (“traitors,” “harlots,” “heathen,” “worldly possessions,” “sluts,” “heresy”)



4. How does Ezekiel's prophecy of doom, in a sense, become a self-fulfilling prophecy? Refer to page 5, "Ezekiel says that God is choosing only 444 people to survive Armageddon and live in the Kingdom of Heaven..."
5. On pages 17 and 18, Eva talks about the education of Righteous Path members. Throughout history, and in our current world, we have seen/see many examples of groups that withhold **BOOKS**, **TECHNOLOGY**, **EDUCATION**, and **KNOWLEDGE** as a means of controlling their members. As a result, it is the work of individuals like Mala Yousafzai, 2014 Nobel Peace Prize winner, to ensure that all females have access to **EDUCATION** and **BOOKS**. She says, "I speak not for myself but for those without voice... those who have fought for their rights... their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated." Discuss specifically how Ezekiel uses **KNOWLEDGE**, or the lack thereof, to control his disciples. Share examples of where this has occurred in our history and where it continues to occur today.
6. Discuss the dynamics of the **RELATIONSHIPS** found in *Down from the Mountain*. How are the **RELATIONSHIPS** in the novel usual and normal? How are they harmful and abnormal? Consider mother-daughter relationships, same sex and mixed sex friendships, and Ezekiel's relationships with his wives, the younger girls in the group, and the male disciples.
7. At dictionary.com, **HYPOCRISY** is defined as: "a pretense of having a virtuous character, moral or religious beliefs or principles, etc., that one does not really possess." As Eva begins coming of age and is exposed to the outside world, she begins to see the holes in Ezekiel's ways. Give examples of **HYPOCRISY** in Ezekiel's teachings and behaviors.
8. There are many **ALLUSIONS** to *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* by C. S. Lewis throughout *Down from the Mountain*. Many consider the books in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series to be Christian **ALLEGORY**. In what ways is the prophet, Ezekiel, different from the character of Aslan from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, who many believe is an **ALLEGORY** for Christ? Were the **ALLUSIONS** to *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* effective tools in helping you understand why Eva began questioning cult life? Explain.
9. In *Down from the Mountain*, there are many examples of **IRONY**, defined at dictionary.com as: "the use of words to convey a meaning that is the opposite of its literal meaning." For example, on page 25, when Ezekiel is preparing Eva to sell her jewelry at the flea market in Boulder he says, "'You will be working with worldly goods and the heathens who buy them. I'll be watching you to be sure you stay pure and sweet.'" In what ways is this statement **IRONIC**?
10. Beginning on page 40, Eva describes her first trip to Boulder - her first contact with the outside world since she was very young. Imagine seeing your world through the **LENS** of someone like Eva. How might she see your world differently from her own? Think about the things you own, the food you eat, the clothes you wear, the freedoms you have, the way your family operates, and the role religion plays in your life.
11. What role does Eva and Rachel's contact with the "heathen" world play in how they change?
12. Through many of our lenses, Eva's world might seem one of gloom and doom, but Eva and her mother manage to find **BEAUTY** in their world. Refer to their discussion on page 119 when Mother Martha helps Eva see her own beauty. Find more examples of **BEAUTY** and joy in Eva's world.
13. In what ways is Eva obtaining a library card, described on pages 189 - 192, symbolic of her **FREEDOM** and coming of age?

14. If **COURAGE** is “the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger, pain, etc. without fear; bravery,” and **COWARDICE** is “lack of courage to face danger, difficulty, opposition, pain, etc.” (as defined at dictionary.com), do the characters in *Down from the Mountain* exhibit **COURAGE** or **COWARDICE**? Give examples of specific actions by specific characters in *Down from the Mountain* that either exhibit **COURAGE** or **COWARDICE**.
15. Author Elizabeth Fixmer is a therapist who counsels former religious cult members. How does her firsthand knowledge impact *Down from the Mountain* and your response to the book? Look at some survivor stories and compare these stories to those of the survivors of the Righteous Path. For instance, read the ABC News article entitled, “Child Survivors Recall Waco Fire 10 Years On”: <http://abcnews.go.com/Primetime/story?id=131981>. What parallels can you draw between the Waco siege and the ending of the Righteous Path in *Down from the Mountain*?
16. Explore some actual past or present groups often considered **RELIGIOUS CULTS** like the David Koresh and the Branch Davidians, Jim Jones and the People’s Temple, and L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology. Look at significant events such as the Jonestown Massacre and the Waco siege (which is referred to in *Down from the Mountain*). What characteristics do you note in these groups that are similar to those of the Righteous Path?

ADDITIONAL READING

- Believe* by Sarah Aronson (2013)
- Cartwheels in a Sari: A Memoir of Growing Up Cult* by Jayanti Tamm (2009)
- Chosen One* by Carol Lynch Williams (2009)
- Darkest Path* by Jeff Hirsch (2013)
- Eden West* by Pete Hautman (2015)
- Patron Saint of Butterflies* by Cecilia Galante (2008)
- Seed* by Lisa Heathfield (2015)
- Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing Up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs* by Elissa Wall (2008)
- Thirteen* by Tom Hoyle (2015)
- This Side of Salvation* by Jeri Smith-Ready (2014)

ABOUT AUTHOR ELIZABETH FIXMER

Elizabeth Fixmer earned her master of fine arts in writing for children and young adults from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is the author of two books for young adults, *Saint Training* and *Down from the Mountain*. Fixmer is currently at work in southern Wisconsin on a third book for teens, *Mercy*.

In addition, Fixmer was a psychotherapist for over 20 years. Her practice included former cult members. Her patients and their experiences provided her with the inspiration and knowledge to write *Down from the Mountain*. Fixmer is passionate about social justice and believes that education about cults is the best way to avoid their dangers.

Other interests include her pets, food, and the arts.