wild
FROM LOST TO FOUND ON THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL

Cheryl Strayed

“Spectacular... A literary and human triumph.”
—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW
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Discussion Questions

From Oprah.com

1. When Cheryl discovers the guidebook to the Pacific Crest Trail, she says that the trip "was an idea, vague and outlandish, full of promise and mystery." Later, her soon-to-be ex-husband suggests she wants to do the hike "to be alone." What do you think her reasons were for committing to this journey?

2. In the beginning of the book, Cheryl's prayers are literally curse words—curses for her mother's dying, curses against her mother for failing. How does her spiritual life change during the course of the book?

3. Cheryl's pack, also known as Monster, is one of those real-life objects that also makes a perfect literary metaphor: Cheryl has too much carry on her back and in her mind. Are there other objects she takes with her or acquires along the way that take on deeper meanings? How so?

4. "The thing about hiking the Pacific Crest Trail...was how few choices I had and how often I had to do the thing I least wanted to do," writes Cheryl. "How there was no escape or denial." In what ways have her choices helped and/or hurt her up to this point?

5. "Fear, to a great extent, is born of a story we tell ourselves," Cheryl writes her first day on the trail. She is speaking about her fear of rattlesnakes and mountain lions and serial killers. To defeat that fear, she tells herself a new story, the story that she is brave and safe. What do you think about this approach, which she herself calls "mind control"? What are some of her other ways of overcoming fear?

6. At one point, Cheryl tells herself, "I was not meant to be this way, to live this way, to fail so darkly." It's a moment of self-criticism and despair. And yet, some belief in herself exists in that statement. How do the things Cheryl believes about herself throughout the memoir, even during her lowest moments, help or hurt her on the PCT?

7. Walking on the trail during the first few weeks, Cheryl writes, "My mind was a crystal vase that contained only one desire. My body was its opposite: a bag of broken glass." Through the book she talks about the blisters, the dehydration, the exhaustion, and the hunger. How—and why—did this physical suffering help her cope with her emotional pain?

8. Once deep in the wilderness, Cheryl feels something she describes as "radical aloneness." What does she mean by this, and how did her surroundings and situation amplify this feeling?
9. Think about the things—both physical and mental—Cheryl discards along the trail. What are they? How do they change her when they get left behind?

10. Cheryl writes that her old approach to meeting people, especially men, was to present the "least true version of me." How does she change this approach on the PCT?

11. What does the death of Lady mean for Cheryl? What did that horse represent to her and to her mother—and to the rest of their family?

12. Why might Cheryl have identified the fox she sees on the trail as her mother?

13. Why is it so crucial that, after extolling her mother throughout the book, Cheryl lists her mother’s faults and failures?

14. The geographical terrain Cheryl crosses plays such a large part in the memoir. Crater Lake for example, is described as powerful, as if it "would always be here, absorbing every color of visible light but blue." How do her descriptions of the physical landscape create a spiritual or emotional landscape for her readers?

15. Cheryl's fellow hikers play a large role in her experience on PCT. How do you think they contribute to her grieving and healing process? In what ways, beyond providing practical aid, did they enable her to finish her hike?

16. In which moments do you feel that Cheryl has stopped resisting the loss of her mother's death? Where has she found some release?

17. Wild is a journey book. It moves around in time, but it starts in one place and ends in another. At the very end, the story jumps forward to describe what Cheryl doesn’t know yet, what she will find out beyond the wilderness, then concludes with her saying, "It was enough to trust that what I’d done was true." What kind of understanding has she come to by the last line of the book, "How wild it was, to let it be"?
About Cheryl Strayed

Cheryl Strayed is the author of #1 New York Times bestseller WILD, the New York Times bestseller TINY BEAUTIFUL THINGS, and the novel TORCH. WILD was chosen by Oprah Winfrey as her first selection for Oprah's Book Club 2.0. Jean-Marc Vallée is directing the film adaptation of WILD, starring Reese Witherspoon, with a screenplay by Nick Hornby. The film is being produced by Pacific Standard and will be distributed by Fox Searchlight in 2014. WILD was selected as the winner of the Barnes & Noble Discover Award, the Indie Choice Award, an Oregon Book Award, a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, and a Midwest Booksellers Choice Award. Strayed's writing has appeared in THE BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS, the New York Times Magazine, the Washington Post Magazine, Vogue, Salon, The Missouri Review, The Sun, The Rumpus--where she has written the popular "Dear Sugar" column since 2010--and elsewhere. Strayed was the guest editor of BEST AMERICAN ESSAYS 2013 and has contributed to many anthologies. Her books have been translated into more than thirty languages around the world. She holds an MFA in fiction writing from Syracuse University and a bachelor's degree from the University of Minnesota. She lives in Portland, Oregon with her husband and their two children.
The Pacific Crest Trail (commonly abbreviated as the PCT, and occasionally designated as the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail) is a long-distance hiking and equestrian trail closely aligned with the highest portion of the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountain ranges, which lie 100 to 150 miles (160 to 240 km) east of the U.S. Pacific coast. The trail’s southern terminus is on the U.S. border with Mexico, and its northern terminus on the U.S.–Canada border on the edge of Manning Park in British Columbia, Canada; its corridor through the U.S. is in the states of California, Oregon, and Washington.

The Pacific Crest Trail is 2,663 mi (4,286 km) long and ranges in elevation from just above sea level at the Oregon–Washington border to 13,153 feet (4,009 m) at Forester Pass in the Sierra Nevada. The route passes through 25 national forests and 7 national parks. Its midpoint is in Chester, California (near Mt. Lassen), where the Sierra and Cascade mountain ranges meet.

It was designated a National Scenic Trail in 1968, although it was not officially completed until 1993. The PCT was conceived by Clinton Churchill Clarke in 1932. It received official status under the National Trails System Act of 1968.

It is the westernmost and second longest component of the Triple Crown of Hiking.
History

The Pacific Crest Trail was first proposed by Clinton C. Clarke, as a trail running from Mexico to Canada along the crest of the mountains in California, Oregon, and Washington. The original proposal was to link the John Muir Trail, the Tahoe-Yosemite Trail (both in California), the Skyline Trail (in Oregon) and the Cascade Crest Trail (in Washington).

The Pacific Crest Trail System Conference was formed by Clarke to both plan the trail and to lobby the federal government to protect the trail. The conference was founded by Clarke, the Boy Scouts, the YMCA, and Ansel Adams (amongst others). From 1935 through 1938, YMCA groups explored the 2000 miles of potential trail and planned a route, which has been closely followed by the modern PCT route.

In 1968, President Lyndon Johnson defined the PCT and the Appalachian Trail with the National Trails System Act. The PCT was then constructed through cooperation between the federal government and volunteers organized by the Pacific Crest Trail Association. In 1993, the PCT was officially declared finished.

Thru Hiking

Thru hiking is a term used in referring to hikers who complete long distance trails from end-to-end in a single trip. The Pacific Crest Trail, Appalachian Trail, and Continental Divide Trail were the first three long-distance trails in the U.S. Successfully thru-hiking all of these three trails is known as the Triple Crown of Hiking. Thru-hiking is a long commitment, usually taking between four and six months, that requires thorough preparation and dedication. Although the actual number is difficult to calculate, it is estimated that around 180 out of approximately 300 people who attempt a thru-hike complete the entire trail each year. The Pacific Crest Trail Association estimates that it takes most hikers between 6 and 8 months to plan their trip.

The first thing prospective thru hikers have to do before attempting a thru hike is to plan out and sketch out their trip. In general the decision of which route to take needs to be considered. While most hikers travel from the Southern Terminus at the Mexico Border northward to Manning Park, British Columbia, some hikers prefer a southbound route. In a normal weather year, northbound hikes are most practical due to snow and temperature considerations. If snowpack in the Sierra Nevada is high in early June and low in the Northern Cascades, some hikers may choose to 'flip-flop.' Flip-flopping can take many forms but often describes a process whereby a hiker begins at one end (on the PCT, usually the southern end) of the trail and then, at some point, like reaching the Sierra, 'flips' to the end of the trail (Manning Park in B.C.) and hikes southbound to complete the trail. However, it is not currently possible to legally enter the United States from Canada by using the Pacific Crest Trail.

Hikers also have to determine their resupply points. Resupply points are towns or post offices where hikers replenish food and other supplies such as cooking fuel. Hikers can ship packages to themselves at the U.S. Post Offices along the trail, resupply at general and grocery stores along the trail, or any combination of the two. The final major logistical step is to create an approximate schedule for completion. Thru hikers have to make sure they complete enough miles every day to reach the opposite end of the trail before weather conditions make sections impassable. Deep snow pack in the Sierra Nevada can prevent an early start. The timing is a
balance between not getting to the Sierra too soon nor the Northern Cascades too late. Most hikers cover about 20 miles (32 km) per day.

In order to reduce their hiking time, and thereby increase their chances of completing the trail, many hikers try to substantially reduce their pack weight. Since the creation of the Pacific Crest Trail there has been a large movement by hikers away from large heavy packs with a lot of gear. There are three general classifications for hikers: Traditional, Lightweight, and Ultralight. Over the past few years the number of traditional hikers has dropped considerably. The Pacific Crest Trail Association cites Ray Jardine’s book Beyond Backpacking as a great resource for hikers during the planning process. Beyond Backpacking is a “how-to” book for ultralight hikers. In this book Jardine explains how to trim every extra ounce from one’s pack weight by doing everything from cutting extra straps off your pack to eating only food that does not have to be cooked.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pacific_Crest_Trail
Six Reasons *Wild* Almost Didn’t Get Written

As told to Leigh Newman
Oprah.com  |  June 01, 2012

Cheryl Strayed's memoir takes readers on a journey up the rugged Pacific Crest Trail. Today she talks with Oprah.com about those moments when life nearly gets in the way of achieving a dream.

1. The Wrong Idea Persisted and Persisted
I write a lot of essays, and in 2008 I finally decided, "I'll do an essay about my hike." I kept saying to myself, "This is not a book." Even when the essay reached 60 pages, I still thought, "Well, maybe it's a part of a book. I'll write a collection of essays, and it will be the one really long essay."

2. A Rogue Flu Swept in and Took Over Her Life
While I was writing *Wild*, both my kids were in preschool. They were born 18 months apart, and we don't have anyone that takes our kids for free. My husband has his mother, but she really doesn't babysit, and I don't have parents.

Two months before the book was due to my editor, when I really was supposed to be diligently writing along, my husband had to go out of town. And—gulp—it just so happened that both my kids got the flu. There were two full weeks where they couldn't go to preschool, and I was freaking out, saying, "I have this book due! And my husband is out of the country! And here I am at home with two sick kids!" I was absolutely beside myself. I thought I could never finish.

3. Exhaustion Turned into a Voice in Her Head
"I give up! I can't do it." Every day I said this to myself. Every single day. Writing is part intuition and part trial and error, but mostly it's very hard work.

4. The Money Pressure Didn't Ever Stop
I am, as they say, the classic starving artist. While I worked on the book, I was also writing the *Dear Sugar* advice column and mentoring writing students at the Attic Institute in Portland. I taught workshops at universities. I wrote for magazines. This took time and insane amounts of juggling, but it's how I earned a living.

5. A Weird, Scary Moment of Self-Doubt Cropped Up
For three weeks, I holed up by myself in this cabin in a remote corner of Oregon. It's actually the farthest away you can be away from a freeway on-ramp in the United States. During that time alone, I sat in a chair and read the entire book out loud to myself. If someone had filmed those three weeks, it would have been a documentary of a madwoman. I was so obsessed that I
would work around the clock and barely sleep.

There's this weird point in writing where you both can see the work really clearly and deeply—and then also you can't see it all. I worried that I'd failed miserably and that the book didn't make sense and that it was boring and stupid. I thought I would send it in and my editor would say, "Oh, no, we've made a terrible mistake."

6. The Fear of Vicious, Cackling Strangers Gave Her Second Thoughts
When I finished the book, I said to myself, "What have I done?" I really thought, "You are insane, Cheryl, for having written a memoir." With fiction, you can hide behind it. You can say, "Some of these things are true—but not all of them." With a memoir, it's "Here I am!" I was telling the whole world about who I was and what had brought me to this one experience. What if nobody could relate? I was terrified, and I thought, "If people don't like the book, they really just don't like me."
This story of adventure, loss and personal growth is one of those books that readers can't get enough of—literally. So we sat down with Cheryl Strayed to talk about all the juicy bits that aren't in the book, from the joyful and the surprising to the bittersweet.

1. The Scene from the Book That She Hated to Cut but Had To
One of my favorite scenes was about my ex-husband and I living in Brooklyn. It was New Year's Day, and we heard this strange yowling coming from the ceiling of our bedroom closet. So we took a hammer and clawed away until we'd removed all the plaster and Sheetrock. Sitting inside the walls were these two emaciated kittens completely covered in soot and grease. They'd obviously been lost in the innards of the building for weeks.

We saved them, but just finding them was symbolic in a lot of ways, about who we were and what was happening in our marriage at the time. The two of us were like those kittens, lost in the innards of the building. We couldn't find our way out. But I couldn't get the scene to work within the trajectory of the story. So I took it out, which was so, so, so painful.

2. The Trail Buddies She Never Expected to See Again
At the first reading I ever gave for the book, an elderly couple showed up. When I sat down to sign books, they were the first in line. They looked vaguely familiar, but I was in Portland, and it's a small-town kind of place. Everyone looks vaguely familiar.

The husband slid an envelope across the table to me, and the wife said, "Look! Open it up." Inside, there were photographs of me with them on the trail in 1995, and instantly I knew exactly who these people were. They're not in the book—I couldn't write about every single person I encountered—but I met them in central Oregon near a campground near a highway. They were having a picnic when they saw me with my backpack, and, of course, I saw them with their food and nonchalantly started chatting with them. Sure enough, they invited me to have dinner. We had this lovely conversation. Then I hiked on my way, never to see them again. I don't know if we even knew each other's names.

Seventeen years later, they heard me on the radio, and they said, "I bet that is that woman who..." Then they saw my picture in the paper, and they said, "That is the woman" and came to the reading. There at the table, the women told me, "For years, I always remembered you because of when I asked you, 'How do you go on, given the state of your feet?'"
Apparently, I said, "I just keep going. I have to take it one step at a time." The woman told me that every time she had a hard time in life, she would stop and repeat that phrase to herself.

3. The Details About Her Eating Disorder
I mention in the book that I struggled during high school with an eating disorder. I don't think that I had full-on anorexia or bulimia. My problem didn't evolve into mental illness, requiring me to be institutionalized or battle it for my whole life. But I did have a totally messed-up relationship with beauty and my body.

I've always basically looked the same. I'm a size 12. I'm not overweight, but I was never the skinniest little cute thing. And when I was in ninth grade, I just decided that I needed to be that skinny cute thing. So I just stopped eating. By the end of that freshman year, I remember, I weighed in the 90s, and the sad thing was I got all this positive feedback. All the girls my age were saying, "Oh, you're so pretty. You're so skinny." Suddenly, I went from being somebody who's this average person to someone whom everyone compares themselves to, and there's a lot of power in that.

My mom kept saying, "You need to eat a doughnut." I remember my math teacher pulling me aside and saying, "I want you to go talk to the nurse." It was embarrassing, but kind of exciting, too, because I was getting attention and concern.

By the time I was in college, I was back to eating, mostly because...I love food. Even today, if I could take a magic pill that would make me 20 pounds lighter, would I take it? Yeah. But am I going to not eat tacos tonight because of that? No. So I do have, all things considered, a pretty healthy relationship with my body as an adult, and I'm very grateful for that.

4. The Reason She Didn't Have to Go Through Drug Rehab
I was using heroin every day, but not for a long time. It was more "I really want to use it," but not "I have the shakes. I have to use it." Now, if I had kept using it, I would have absolutely continued to become an addict like the guy I call Joe in the book. For 10 years, he was a serious addict. The last time we talked, he'd been in rehab for a year and gotten clean, but who knows? I was pulled out at the right moment. I dodged a bullet.

5. The Story Behind Meeting Her Husband
At the end of the trail, I got to Portland and I had 20 cents. A friend of a friend was having a yard sale, and he said, "Hey, you can sell your stuff if you need to raise some money." So I took my CDs and books and clothes out of storage and put them up for sale. Pretty soon, this incredibly handsome man comes riding up on his bicycle. I immediately throw myself at him. I start flirting like crazy, and he buys my pencil sharpener in the shape of an airplane. As we're chatting, I somehow end up telling him, "I just finished hiking the PCT."

He asks, "Are you Cheryl?" He knew my friend who had sent me all the boxes along the trail. He'd been hearing stories about me all summer. Then he said: "I'm going out to dinner tonight with my friend Brian. Why don't you join us?" So my friend Lisa and I showed up at this Tex-Mex place called Esparza's, and my new handsome pal from the yard sale walks in... with Brian, who was more handsome (to me). The handsomest man on the planet.
6. The Mistake She Never Made Again
Brian and I spent a few months dancing around about how we felt, and then we slept together. I woke up the next morning and said to him: "You know what? I'm done with this time in my life. I don't want to do this anymore." I'd taken a step backward, and I had to pull myself out of it really fast because it made me feel so bad about myself.

I asked him if we could be friends, and we did become friends—but then we fell madly in love with each other. Oddly enough, Brian was the last person I regret having slept with. When we decided not to continue the sexual side of things, he was also at the same moment in his life. He'd been really promiscuous as well, and we both thought, "No more. We're going to change that part of our lives." So we did that together.

7. The Wildest Thing That's Happened Since the Book Came Out
I was doing a reading in St. Paul, Minnesota, and I read a section that included a reference to the POW/MIA bracelet I wore on the trail that belonged to William J. Crockett. When I got back to the hotel, a woman who had been sitting in the audience emailed me. "Oh my gosh," she said, "my co-worker is William J. Crockett's sister." So the sister and I got in touch. She told me about William's death and how important he was to her. She said, "I haven't read the book, but I take it that his name on your bracelet offered you some sort of encouragement and strength, and I'm so glad to hear that."