

One Book, One Valley 2013
The Talk-Funny Girl
by Roland Merullo

Discussion Guide

Linda Upham-Bornstein, Ph.D.

1. Roland Merullo contends that his story is one of human resilience in the face of intense darkness. Throughout the novel Merullo uses the metaphorical place of the museum. The novel begins with a prologue in Marjorie's voice introducing the reader to the dark corners of her childhood in rural New Hampshire. Marjorie contends that the hurt she experienced as a child still haunted her, indeed it "burrows down inside and makes a kind of museum there, with images of the bad times displayed on every wall." What does she mean by this? What emotions does this imagery evoke? Is this an effective metaphor to illustrate how some might deal with hurts of any sort? Did it draw you into the story?
2. In an interview Merullo noted that the book was inspired by an event in Vermont 25 years earlier. On his way home from work as a carpenter he stopped into a convenience store. A young, perhaps 3-year-old, poorly dressed, boy was happily running down the store aisles and inadvertently knocked over some cans. His mother, also poorly dressed, "grabbed him and shook him and said, 'What's the matter with you! Are you a nigger baby from China? What are you, a little nigger baby from China?'" Merullo, shocked by the exchange, remained mute. The event and his lack of a response has remained with him. He realized that there are people who are living lives beyond his experience and comprehension. This book grew out of the seeds thus planted in Merullo's mind. What connections can be drawn from this event to Marjorie's story? Does knowing the event that shaped the author's exploration of poverty, racism and abuse influence its impact? Discuss the various responses to poverty, racism and abuse by the book's characters - Marjorie, her parents, Pastor Schect, Arron Patanauk, Aunt Elaine, Sands, Mrs. Jensen, Roland Merwin.
3. At the beginning of Chapter 10 (p. 90) Marjorie observed that "the work saved me." Some suggest that work defines us, perhaps more than we wish. How did work save Marjorie? Discuss the culture of work. What are the reasons that drive people to choose certain career paths? Do we define our work or are we defined by our work? Is work redemptive? How? When is work destructive rather than constructive?
4. This story is also about the power of place. What binds people to place - a region, a community? Why are some willing to move on while others are wed to location? How can a fictional story illuminate our understanding of a sense of place? With the decline of the pulp and paper industry in Coos County, many have been forced to move elsewhere in search of employment, while others struggle to eke out a living in a region to which they are closely connected. To some, a sense of place is so powerful it transcends the loss of work. The loss of industry often leads those left behind to redefine place. How has the recent economic decline in the North Country forced the region to re-envision its identity? Discuss the sense of place in Merullo's work. Does the novel connect to the struggles faced by North Country communities? Or does it distort the reality of life in the North Country? Why/Why not?
5. One of Merullo's themes focuses on the "invisible poor." Who are they? Are they poor because of the choices they make or because events beyond their control? Do we really understand the needs and wants of those who struggle economically? How does Merullo suggest they are shaped by their own fears of

society and culture? Does this novel pull back the veil of secrecy regarding the poor in a community or does it obscure or distort the reality of life below the level of historical scrutiny? How?

6. Spirituality shapes many of the characters in Merullo's work. In the novel, religion is used as both a positive (redemptive) and negative (destructive) tool. What are the various spiritual beliefs embraced by Murello's main characters? Discuss how their spirituality shapes them. What are your observations regarding religion and its influence on a community? Is religion an effective tool to control behavior? Why/Why not?

7. Merullo's "Cathedral" is both a physical building and a metaphorical place. What is the symbolism of the cathedral? What is Marjorie's relationship with the "cathedral?" Sands' relationship? Is this an effective metaphor? Explain. Do you have a "cathedral"- a place to sit and reflect?

8. Cultural ethics are central to the novel. Who in your opinion responded the most ethically to Marjorie? Which adult(s) showed growth in respect to developing an ethical sense? Explain. What circumstances caused adults to make unethical choices? What ethical model do you think Marjorie will take from her experiences into her role as parent?

9. What makes coming-of-age stories so universally compelling? Compare and contrast *The Talk-Funny Girl* to other coming-of-age stories that you may have read.

10. The author has chosen to create a peculiar dialect for Marjorie's family. Why does Marjorie cling so tightly to this dialect? Why was it important to be different? Is this an effective tool to demonstrate Marjorie's isolation from society? Why/Why not? Does it draw attention away from the story? Is there a peculiar regional dialect in the North Country? What can a dialect tell us about a region? Do you pay attention to dialectical differences?