Discussion Questions for *Full Body Burden* by Kristen Iversen


1. Are you glad you read *Full Body Burden*?

2. Did you know anything about Rocky Flats before reading the book?

3. Does this book have any relevance to the state of things in the United States today, and if so, what?

4. Has anyone had any experiences that relate to places or experiences in the book?

5. Iversen weaves together two narratives: a memoir of growing up and a historical account of Rocky Flats and the nuclear industry. Was this effective?

6. From Fluffy to Tonka to the wild rabbits and deer at the Rocky Flats site to the deformed chickens, animals are a constant presence in the book. What role do animals play in the storyline? How were pets and animals important to Kristen’s household, and why?

7. When Kristen was fourteen years old, her father crashed the family car. He said he had swerved to avoid an oncoming car, but it was clear to her that he had been drinking. Since her parents did not seek medical treatment for her, it was not until years later that she found out she had broken her neck. She writes, “We never speak of the accident again. Silence is an easy habit for a family or a community. This is just for us to know. Eventually we’ll forget this ever happened.” (p. 110) How did you react to this story?

8. *Full Body Burden* contains many surprising facts about Rocky Flats and about radioactive contamination, such as the fact that a single microgram of plutonium is a potentially lethal dose (p. 24) or that in 1970 there was no emergency response plan to protect the public in the event of a major disaster at Rocky Flats (p. 67). Were you surprised by anything that you learned from the book? What fact made the deepest impression on you?

9. The poem at the end of the book, “Plutonian Ode” by Allen Ginsberg, was written on the occasion of the 1978 Rocky Flats protest and specifically refers to Rockwell, Rocky Flats, and other nuclear weapons facilities. In it, Ginsberg describes plutonium as a “dreadful presence,” a “delusion of metal empires,” and as “matter that renders Self oblivion.” How does the poem reinforce the message of the book?
10. During the Cold War, an impenetrable veil existed between the nuclear weapons industry and the general public. The U.S. government considered this secrecy necessary for national security. Do you think there is any way the government could have communicated more to the general public without jeopardizing the nation’s safety?

11. For many years the nuclear weapons industry was exempted from environmental regulation because national defense was considered a higher priority. This book reveals the tragic consequences of that exemption. Are there situations in which you believe it is justified to exempt the government, certain industries, or private companies from the law?

12. We live in the era of Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media, as well as organizations that seek transparency in government, such as WikiLeaks. Do you think the level of secrecy maintained by the DOE and the operators of Rocky Flats during much of the plant’s history could be maintained today?

13. Do you have unanswered questions? If the author were here, what would you ask her?

14. Are there other questions you would like to ask or comments you would like to make?