MARINER BOOKS
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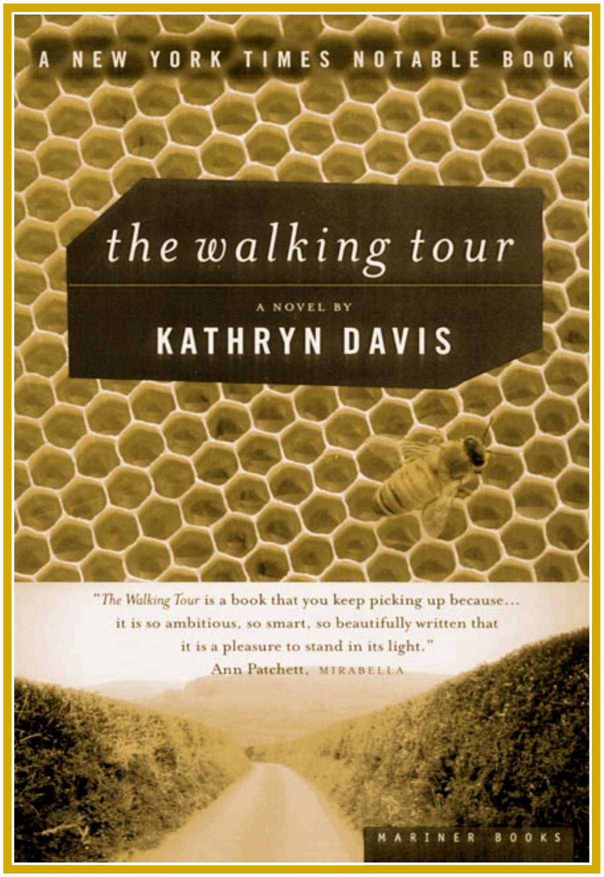
A Reader's Guide


A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK
the walking tour
A NOVEL BY
KATHRYN DAVIS
"The Walking Tour is a book that you keep picking up because… it is so ambitious, so smart, so beautifully written that it is a pleasure to stand in its light."
Ann Patchett, MIRABELLA
MARINER BOOKS

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A *New York Times* Notable Book

A *Los Angeles Times* Best Book of the Year

A Book Sense '76 Title

"A brilliantly dexterous novel." — New York Times

"Beguiling and bracing." — Los Angeles Times Book Review

THE WALKING TOUR

"So ambitious, so smart, so beautifully written that it is a pleasure to stand in its light." — Mirabella

At the turn of the twentieth century, two couples—the artist Carole Ridingham and her businessman husband, Bobby Rose, and Bobby's partner, Coleman Snow, and his wife, Ruth Farr—embark on a walking tour of southern Wales. During that tour a fatal accident occurs. The question of exactly what happened at storm-lashed Worms Head, at the western tip of the Gower peninsula, preoccupies not only an ensuing negligence trial, but also the narrator, Bobby and Carole's only child, Susan. Susan lives alone in her parents' ruined house near the coast of Maine, addressing us from a future in which nature itself has been drastically transformed, a future providing an unusual perspective on the way we live now. Assisted by court transcripts, her mother's letters, photographs taken by Coleman, a notebook computer containing Ruth Farr's journal, and a menacing young vagrant named Monkey, Susan ultimately identifies the moral predicament at the heart of her parents' lives and work—and at the heart of the book: we are morally culpable beings despite our imperfect knowledge of ourselves and the world.

As beautiful and unpredictable as the Welsh landscape through which the touring party moves—and as Carole Ridingham herself—*The Walking Tour* is part mystery, part courtroom drama, part restructured myth, part futuristic morality fable, and part shrewd meditation on the uneasy marriage of art and commerce and the uneasy relationships of men and women. In a sequence of worlds—from ancient Wales through postapocalypse Maine—in which "time has no meaning" and in which legends from the distant past impinge on tomorrow's daily life, Kathryn Davis has constructed a novel of mystifying wizardry, moral certitude, and absolute artistry. Like the paintings of Carole Ridingham, *The Walking Tour* presents the familiar world through a totally new vision.

For Discussion

We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and, for every reader, provide a deeper understanding of *The Walking Tour.*

1. What is the significance of the "ruined house and acreage" that Susan, Carole, and Bobby once called home? Why is it important that Susan tells her story from the midst of this ruin? What other ruins occur in the novel (Tintern Abbey and Bobby's library, for example), and what is their significance?

2. Susan raises the issue of agendas at the very beginning of her narration. What agendas, overt and covert, can we ascribe to Carole, Bobby, Ruth, and Coleman as they set out on their walking tour? To what degree does each of them reach his or her goal? What is Susan's agenda, and does she reach her goal?

3. Susan comments that her mother couldn't stop herself from filling her paintings with objects, "since God knows there's comfort to be had in endlessly filling the intolerable void with familiar objects." In what ways do the people in this novel, including both Carole and Susan, fill "the intolerable void"?

4. Brenda Fluellen's brochure includes the sentence "In Cymru time has no meaning." What are the implications of this statement in relation to the Welsh legends alluded to by Davis, to the events of the walking tour, and to Susan's reconstruction of those events?

5. Referring to the distorted perspective *(anamorphosis)* used in Holbein's famous painting, *The Ambassadors,* Susan mentions Holbein's and Carole's "using tricks of perspective to so distort an object … that it can be comprehended only from an unusual angle or through a special lens." To what extent is the perspective of each character, including Susan, distorted? What are the consequences of distorted perspectives?

6. How might Carole's poems apply to the characters and events of the novel? Who are the hare, mouse, and other prey? Who are the devil's hound, white tomcat, and other hunters? What is especially significant about the repeated final verse: *"cunning and art / you do not lack / but always the whistle / will fetch you back!"?* Why aren't cunning and art enough?

7. SnowWrite & RoseRead became, in Susan's words, "a sinister tool that changed how people saw the world." How was it sinister? How has it changed the way people, including Susan, see the world? Susan goes on to wonder how it worked, "By which I mean morally, not technically." To what extent have computers affected our ability to make moral choices? Carole said, in connection with SnowWrite & RoseRead, that "The dish ran away with the spoon." She meant by this, says Susan, "when art went out the window, morality went along with it." In what ways might art sustain morality?

8. Susan describes the landscape of Coleman's photographs as "A brutal landscape, dangerous and strange, but also enchantingly beautiful." In what ways is this an accurate description — or not — of our actual world; the world of Carole, Bobby, Ruth, and Coleman; and Susan's and Monkey's world? What is the relationship between beauty and danger?

9. "The dream boy was me," Monkey tells Susan. "She [Ruth] dreamed me up and now here I am, at your service." What is the relationship between Monkey and the gray "dream boy" encountered by Ruth in Llangleisiad? How are we to understand the clause, "the dream boy spread his wings and flew"? What is special about where Monkey first claims he lives — "a most beautiful country filled with streams and meadows, woods and plains" — and how does it relate him to the walking tour?

10. "In any given situation," says Susan, "whoever has the most at stake usually has the least power." How does this statement apply to Susan herself, and to individual participants in the walking tour? What does each have at stake and what degree of power — and what kind of power — does each wield?

11. Coleman decided that his new program board "far exceeded anything Bobby was capable of understanding, let alone imagining. And when a man, even a very smart one, messed with things beyond the realm of his imagination, he ran the risk of corrupting either the things being messed with or the people they affected or, more often, himself." How do these statements apply to Bobby and to others? What kinds of corruption — moral, physical, aesthetic, and other — occur in *The Walking Tour,* and who or what is responsible in each instance?

12. When she sees the five paintings in the bomb shelter that Monkey and Peggy have taken over, Susan expresses unalloyed surprise. "But where on earth did the paintings come from?" she asks; "when on earth did she paint them? Because there are things in them … that she couldn't possibly have known about before she went to Wales." How would you explain the existence of these paintings? What are the implications of their existence?

13. Near the novel's end and in connection with her mother's painting of Worms Head, Susan refers to "redemption" — "in this case not to a spiritual act but to a physical problem confronting the painter in oils." In what ways do spiritual redemption and the painter's technical redemption operate in the novel? How might each kind of redemption reveal the truth underlying surface appearances?

14. Near the end of Susan's narration we learn that it was Carole who planned the walking tour and made the first contact with the Fluellens and that it was "poor Mr. Snow" who signed the deposit check. To what extent do these revelations help to clarify the motives, relationships, and events that have gone before and the walking tour's outcome? In what ways does Carole exercise "her independent spirit," and with what consequences for herself and others?

KATHRYN DAVIS

Kathryn Davis is the author of three previous novels: *Labrador* (1988), *The Girl Who Trod on a Loaf* (1993), and *Hell* (1998), the first of which won the 1989 Janet Heidinger Kafka Prize. Davis's short stories and poems have appeared in *The American Poetry Review, Antaeus, The Antioch Review, The Atlantic, Esquire, Ploughshares,* and other magazines. She has twice received grants from both the Vermont Council on the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts; and in 1999 she received the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Davis was born in Philadelphia. She attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and Barnard College and received her B.A. from Goddard College. She is a professor of literature at Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs, New York, and lives with her husband and their daughter in Vermont. She is at work on her fifth novel.

A CONVERSATION WITH KATHRYN DAVIS

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO WRITE ABOUT COMPUTERS, A SUBJECT YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT?

Computers first captured my imagination at least five years ago. I was minding my own business, typing along, when suddenly I saw my words begin to leak away line by line, starting at the bottom of the screen and gradually moving toward the top. I closed the file quickly; shortly thereafter I couldn't believe my eyes when I called up a different file and saw the exact words that had been draining out of the earlier file pouring back in at the bottom of the screen.

"Leak," "drain," "pour" — as the words suggest, the phenomenon struck me as watery, tidal in fact, a concept I retained in *The Walking Tour* in my description of SnowWrite & RoseRead. The phenomenon also struck me as eerie, uncanny, menacing — evidence of a mysterious aperture, a point of intersection between two apparently dissimilar worlds. My imagination became wholly engaged.

WHEN DID YOU BEGIN WRITING?

My first book was called *The Silver Sledge* — I was probably about seven when I wrote and illustrated it. Now, as then, I'm interested in the plight of a character embarked on a journey through an utterly unfamiliar (and frequently fantastic) landscape, generally in order to track down something or someone of ambiguous importance. The quest itself has never interested me as much as the chance to describe that other world and its inhabitants, and to use the encounter as a way of analyzing the rules that govern the so-called real world.

When I write, it's in order to be able to dwell in that other place; when I was seven years old, writing *The Silver Sledge,* it was the place I was making for myself apart from the grim household of my childhood. When I'm there, everything is vital, shimmering, elusive.

YOU FREQUENTLY JUXTAPOSE A FEW NARRATIVE VOICES OR POSITIONS IN SPACE OR TIME. WHY IS THAT?

Generally I consider myself to be a very single-minded person; I can't do more than one thing at a time. Unlike most of my friends, for example, I can't talk on the phone while performing other activities. I suppose there are advantages to this personality trait — without it I probably never would have been able to finish writing a novel. But there are also clear disadvantages; and I suspect my preference for juxtaposition might be one of the ways I've devised to overcome the problem.

In *The Walking Tour,* I knew I had things I wanted to say about the way we live now, but the idea of speaking from the present seemed cramped and limited. It also struck me that to speak in such an analytical way about the present from the present might elicit a didactic tone that would be the kiss of death to any narrative, and that to speak about the present from the past would be silly. Clearly my best choice was to speak about the present from the future, except that then, God help me, I'd be writing science fiction, and the last thing in the world I wanted to hear coming out of my narrator's mouth was anything even remotely like, "and then I climbed into my hovercraft …" As it turned out, the challenge of creating a viable "future" — a world I could describe without dying of embarrassment at the mere thought of having attempted such a thing — became one of my favorite aspects of the writing of this novel.

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