

The Yellow House: A Memoir by Sarah M. Broom

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

On perspective

At the opening of the story, Sarah Broom describes the lot where the Yellow House once stood from fifteen thousand feet above, saying that from those great heights, her brother Carl, who tends the space, would not be seen.

Have you ever brought up a Google Earth image of your house from above and zoomed out? What impact did seeing your home, your street, your state, your country shrink in comparison to the world have on your perspective?

On birth order

When the author calls her eldest brother, Simon, in North Carolina “to explain all the things I want to know and why, he expresses worry that by writing this all down here, I will disrupt, unravel, and tear down everything the Broom family has ever built.” He tells her he’d like to live in the future and forget about the past. (p. 8)

The twelfth of twelve children, Broom works hard to reconstruct the life that came before her and to cleave it to the life she knew in the Yellow House and after, to make sense of a whole and to connect it to place. What role do you think birth order plays in her desire to preserve vs. Simon’s need to forget? Who is the keeper of the history in your family and who places more value on the present?

On place vs. story

Sarah Broom’s brother Carl, the seventh of twelve, occupies the space—keeps the space—where the Yellow House sat long after it’s gone. She describes this occupation (p. 3): “Sometimes you can find Carl alone on our lot, poised on an ice chest, searching the view, as if for a sign, as if for a wonder.” She says he is “babysitting ruins. But that is not his language or sentiment; he would never betray the Yellow House like that.”

Do some people in your family tend to place—to “babysit ruins”—and others to story? Have you ever tried to keep a place alive by occupying it after the circumstances that led you to being there in the first place ended? What do you think it means to Carl to stay?

On names

The author refers to Hurricane Katrina throughout as “the Water.”

Why do you think she made this choice? How does the twenty-four-hour news cycle and the repetition of language affect you as a reader/viewer? Describe what “the Water” communicates to you, and how it changed over the course of the book. Do you think it will be the same for every reader?

On Chef Menteur Highway

Chef Menteur Highway plays an integral, “sinister” role in *The Yellow House*. On p. 6 the author states: “The name, translated from French, means ‘chief liar.’ ”

What are the truths we think we know about New Orleans compared to the story Broom tells? What other cities present the same kinds of half truths? Have you ever stumbled into a neighborhood in a city you thought you knew that told a different story?

On John McDonogh Day

The author tells us, “John McDonogh was a wealthy slave owner who in 1850 bequeathed half of his estate to New Orleans public schools, insisting that his money be used for ‘the establishment and support of free schools wherein the poor and the poor only and of both sexes and classes and castes of color shall have admittance.’” We are then told how the black students must wait in the heat on the day that celebrates McDonogh, while white students pay tribute to him first.

Are there widely accepted/institutionalized holidays or rituals you can think of that exclude or erase certain people, or situations in which symbolism has been deemed more important than the wellness of the participants? Thinking about the role of symbolism and ritual in cultural bonding, whose culture is McDonogh Day intended to bond, and at what cost?

On parenting then and now

On p. 37, the author writes about children’s place in an adult world and the role adults played in teaching them the facts of life: “In those days, children did not speak openly to their parents. ‘Get out from grown folks’ business,’ you were told. Whatever we found out, we found out on our own.”

Who were your youthful “teachers”? Tell one story about a friend/sister/ brother who schooled you on something parents didn’t talk to their kids about when you were young. How solid was the advice? Parents pride themselves on being open with their kids these days, but has something been lost?

On family firsts

On p. 57, Broom writes: “Mom paid for her house with money from Webb’s life insurance policy. She was nineteen years old, the first in her immediate family to own a house, a dream toward which her own mother, Lolo, still bent all of her strivings.”

Who accomplished these kinds of firsts in your family? Were they long-ago accomplishments or more recent? What kinds of sacrifices or good-willed pitching in were made and by whom to help make them possible?

On hard memories vs. good ones

Broom writes almost in the same breath of harsh memories like having racial epithets hurled at them by their transient white neighbors in the trailer park, Oak Haven, across the street, and of the weekly parties Ivory Mae and Simon threw and movies projected on the not-yet-Yellow House (p. 68), “the side of the house becoming, for a night, the greatest movie screen.”

What kinds of institutionalized or other hardships are you able to square with happier memories from your childhood? What bright memories stick out as balancing more difficult times? What seem the most difficult circumstances to square for the Broom family before the Water?

On unspoken boundaries

The author states that the adults on the street for the most part stayed out of each other’s houses (p. 87), “unless there was good cause,” like when “Ms. Octavia’s . . . husband, Alvin, died.”

Do you have friendly longtime neighbors whose houses you’ve never been in until there was some kind of emergency? What makes people draw the line at the front door with people they’ve chatted on the lawn with for years?

Likewise, during the eldest daughter, Deborah’s, wedding reception, the author says (p. 98) it “mostly held to the outdoors, but people still wandered inside, to the bathroom, and then others went in just to see what we had, Mom was

convinced.” Ivory Mae felt that “the objects contained within a house spoke loudest about the person to whom the things belonged. More than that, she believed that the individual belonged to the things inside the house, to the house itself.” For Ivory Mae, this intrusion began what the author calls “the shifty settling in of shame.”

Sometimes objects simply reveal surprising details about a person. Are there objects that expose a part of you that you hold sacred and prefer to protect? Are there common objects in plain sight that reveal everything to close friends but nothing to strangers? What are the objects in the Yellow House that reveal the most about the characters?

On land development

Talking about the land deals that never come to fruition in New Orleans East, the author writes that (p. 88): “there were more paved roads than walkways— certain parts of the East were best driven through. Landscapes communicate feeling. Walking, you can grab on to the texture of a place, get up close to the human beings who make it, but driving makes distance, grows fear.”

Are there parts of your town that have been developed in such a way that they suppress a sense of community rather than inspire it? Alternately, have you seen development that made an abandoned or wrecked part of your city or town suddenly come alive? Was there anything that could have been done differently on the swath of land in New Orleans East that would have changed the outcome?

On Simon’s death

After Simon dies, the house, with so many children and so much responsibility, falls into chaos. Routines fall apart. The boys get in trouble. Ivory Mae has to depend on public transportation or rides to get anywhere. She says (p. 114), “I was a little pathetic at first. I needed to make myself know things.” When she finally learns to drive after a couple of failed strategies, she says, “It was my Independence Day.”

Has there ever been a time in your life that has forced you to recalibrate, to remake yourself into someone who’s brave in a novel way in order to meet challenges in unfamiliar territory or in territory that has suddenly been rendered unfamiliar by an event? What does this reveal about Ivory Mae?

On the growing-up world

In the chapter “Map of My World,” the author describes five points on the map that make (p. 117) “my growing-up world.”

What are some of the places that you can still inhabit vividly in your mind’s eye? Why do you think those stuck and not others? Why do you think the points in the author’s growing-up world stuck with her so strongly?

On the ground

The author speaks frequently of the “squishy earth” (p. 123) being “eaten by it.” Something as ordinary and foundational as the earth beneath her feet is routinely described as being untrustworthy. She writes: “In our child-wise minds, the seal between deep ground and our present reality above that ground is string thin.”

What real threats/facts of life did you and the kids around you know when you were growing up that turned out to be spot-on and not just boogie men or childhood exaggeration?

On selective vision

The author is nearly legally blind and describes living in a “blurry” world until she is ten years old. When her mother discovers her vision problem, Ivory Mae buys glasses for Sarah, who up until that point has been perhaps mercifully shielded from some of the details in her life. Then, walking home from school one day, with twenty-twenty eyesight for

the first time, “one detail overwhelms them all.” She writes (p. 135): “Our side of Wilson Avenue, the short end, seems a no-matter place where police cars routinely park, women’s heads bobbing up and down in the driver’s seat.” After that, she tries “not to see what is right in front of my face. Sometimes, when I want the world to go blurry again, I remove my glasses when passing by these scenes. In this way, I learn to see and to go blind at will.”

What kinds of things have you tried not to see in your own city or neighborhood? What do you think the author was genuinely aware of before the glasses?

On middle school

The author writes about smiling “with abandon, goofy-like” (p. 136) when she is in sixth grade and proudly posing with her Edward Livingston Middle School honors sash. In the next breath, middle school goes *Lord of the Flies*. The “school hallways hold contests of a lurid sort.” And (p. 140) “some days we have substitute teachers who seem called in from off the street. Many times, the substitute puts a movie into the VCR that has nothing to do with the subject matter or with learning. Everything in the world feels stupid then.” Later, “We had become a horde, to be gathered and made to ‘act right,’ indistinguishable from one another.” Overnight honors students become fighters, cynicism creeps in replacing goofy pride, and order dissolves into chaos.

What moments in middle school stick out to you as being turning points? What messages do you think these students are responding to? How does Broom describe her evolution when she changes from Livingston Middle School to Word of Faith? Is Word of Faith a “good school”? Reflect, as well, on times you have moved from one social situation to another and how you could, or could not, decide how to present yourself.

On duality

Throughout *The Yellow House* the author repeats Ivory Mae’s words: “You know this house not all that comfortable for other people.” But further she says: “My mother was raised by my grandmother Lolo to make a beautiful home; I love to make beauty out of ordinary spaces. I had not known this back when I was living inside the Yellow House, but I knew it in my adult years when I created rooms that people gravitated to, the kind generally described as warm. Once, a friend came to one of these made places, an apartment in Harlem, and sat in the parlor looking around. The room had made him feel alive, even happy to be alive, he said. And then, ‘You have things to make a home with.’ People are always telling me this.” At the same time she writes about the shame of bringing people to the house she grew up in because of its deteriorating condition, of the friends she and her sister never make because of the inherent threat of having to invite them over. But (p. 148): “America required these dualities anyway and we were good at presenting our double selves. The house, unlike the clothes our mother had tailored to us, was an ungainly fit.”

What kinds of duality do you live with? Are some kinds easier to live with than others?

On “the Water”

The events of the Water are described as they are occurring in real time, often through Broom’s interviews with her siblings and mother. We see Carl awaken to the storm flooding his house and flee to the attic from which, by daybreak, he has to cut his way out through the roof. Or the author narrates her brother Michael in the midst of the chaos (p. 207): “The men foraged for food and other items from broken-in stores, eventually finding an air mattress and two boats. Whatever you needed and the last thing on earth you needed could be found, it seemed, in the dirty, fetid water.” Meanwhile in Harlem, Broom is desperately scanning the news channels in search of (p. 202): “Carl’s white cotton socks pulled up high, size 13 feet.” Searching for the faces of “my beloveds.”

How does the switch in narrative tone impact you as a reader? When Michael and his group are rescued (p. 207) does it seem to you that they can truly feel safe? Can you see yourself braving “fetid water” to find food and essential supplies for your family, or imagine being unable to contact your “beloveds” in catastrophic circumstances? With this in mind,

think about Broom's trip to join her family in California at last, and hiding in her brother Byron's bathroom (p. 210) "writing scenes into a notebook instead of feeling." Does this differ from her description of writing prior to this? What information does Broom give us about the fate of New Orleans's population after the storm that was new to you?

On the long-term impact of catastrophe

During the Water, Broom writes, "All told, we scatter in three cardinal directions, nine runny spots on the map." Even after it recedes, most remain dispersed. How do climate events like the hurricane impact families, employment, housing prices? What effect do you think this kind of scattering after climate crises has on regional culture?