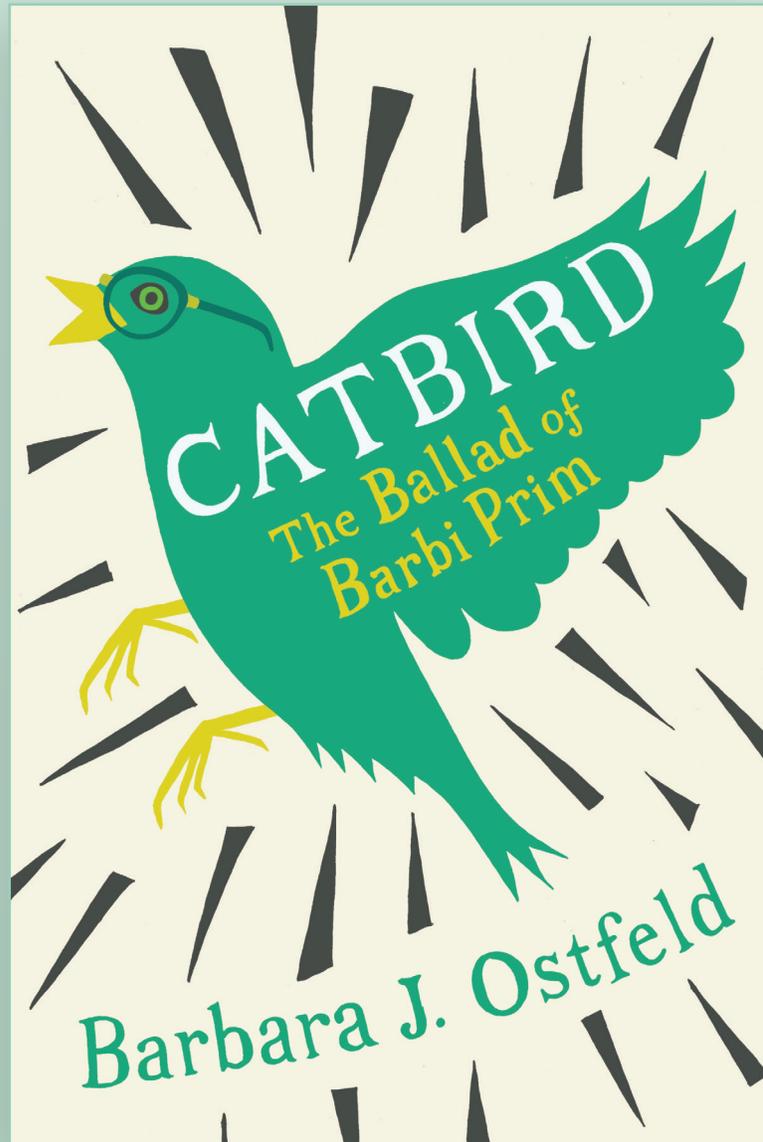


A Reading Guide for Study Groups

# *CATBIRD* *The Ballad of Barbi Prim*



ERWA

*catbirdbook.com*

# CATBIRD *The Ballad of Barbi Prim*

TRIGGER WARNING: This guide contains information about sexual assault and/or violence, which may be triggering to survivors.

## Questions

1. In **Stanza 1, “Ditty,”** Barbara narrates her childhood in a child’s voice. Did this help you remember something you said or thought as a young child?
2. In what ways do her parents’ idiosyncrasies influence her? Were you similarly affected by your parents’ personalities and perspectives?
3. What roles do her elementary school and her synagogue play in this part of the story? How would you describe the roles school or ritual had in your life when you were a child?
4. Describe Barbara’s relationship to music. Did you have a special passion when you were a child?
5. In what ways does the Civil Rights Movement influence Barbara? Do you remember being influenced by a societal change?
6. By **Stanza 2, “Tune,”** Barbara is thinking more about her body and her appearance. How does body image affect her worldview? What do you remember about how you thought of your body at different ages in childhood?
7. Describe the effects of her father’s pronouncements and attitudes on her behavior and on the way she interprets the world around her. Is there anything an authority figure said to you when you were young that’s always stuck with you?
8. In what ways did Barbara feel inferior to other girls? Why? When you were a child, did you compare yourself to your classmates?
9. In what ways does her identification as “other” affect her actions as a student, a protester, a decision-maker? What is your experience of feeling like an outsider?
10. Barbara registered her pain by cutting herself. When you were a teenager, how did you express extreme emotion?

## Thoughts



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11. In **Stanza 3, “Psalm,”** we follow Barbara to Hebrew Union College. In what ways does this unique undergraduate experience influence her actions and her thinking? What aspects of your young adult life continue to influence you?
12. Why does Barbara feel guilty about being raped? How did you react when you were reading that vignette? How did you react when it was hardly mentioned again for some time?
13. Why doesn't she report her rape? Or tell even her therapists until much later? Have you ever kept a secret that hurt you?
14. In what ways do Barbara's compulsions begin to affect her health? Have you ever felt physically affected by powerful thoughts?
15. Although she lands an important synagogue position, do you think Barbara was ready to assume its responsibilities? Have you ever felt unprepared to take on something big and new?
16. Barbara assumed that as a woman cantor, she had to devise and wear a suitable “uniform.” Did you ever wear a uniform, real or self-imposed? How did this affect you? What was it like for you to wear ordinary clothes afterward?
17. Why does she make unhealthy choices regarding men? Have you made any similar choices in your relationships?
18. What are some early signs that Barbara is beginning to evolve as a leader? Do you recall a particular turning point in your life?
19. By **Stanza 4, “Canticle,”** Barbara's obsessions revolve around her infertility. Do you know someone who has struggled with fertility issues, or the decision to become or not become a parent?
20. What are some of the stressors and worries she encounters in her work? How are they similar and different to yours? How are her circumstances similar and different to yours?
21. How do these stressors and worries affect her behavior? How do your worries affect your life?

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22. What elements characterize Barbara's times of joy? How do you express joy?
23. What was your reaction to Dan's arrest? Have you encountered a dramatic change of circumstance?
24. How do you think Barbara handled the aftermath? What might she have done differently?
25. What decisions does Barbara make that enable her to move up and out of despair? How did you manage at a challenging time in your life?
26. In **Stanza 5, "Romance,"** Barbara relies heavily on a loving relationship for support. How does therapy enable her to become more self-reliant? Have you ever found yourself depending too heavily on someone else? What did you do?
27. Why does she detail the domestic dramas that take place as the Gertz and Balaban children begin to encounter each other?
28. What do you make of the therapeutic eureka moment involving Barbara's white blouse? Have you ever had a similar eureka moment?
29. How would you describe the changes in Barbara's self-image in Stanza 5? Is yours evolving?
30. Do you approve or disapprove of her resignation from Temple Beth Am? What would you do—or have you done—in similar circumstances?
31. At what point do you think she begins to see herself as important just as herself? Why has it taken this long? Are you aware of your own importance?
32. Why is **Stanza 6, "Idyll,"** given such an exalted name?
33. Why do you think its first vignette describes an act of rebellion?
34. What would you have done about the Martin Luther King Jr. Day sermon if you had been in Barbara's position?

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35. Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, figures twice in “Idyll.” Have you ever felt regret about the way you’ve treated someone? Has prayer or introspection helped you make amends?
36. Throughout, Barbara mentions her mouth and whether it is open or closed. What did this mean to you when you were reading the book? Is it a women’s issue? How do you decide when to speak up or speak out?
37. What are the main themes in **Stanza 7, “Recapitulation,”** as Barbara enters retirement? What do you imagine spending your time on—or what do you spend time on—in your retirement?
38. Why do you think Barbara wrote *Catbird*? Have you ever kept a journal or a diary? If you’ve gone to therapy, do you tell your story differently as a result?
39. Of the reasons that *Catbird* has a happy ending, which do you think was the most influential? What do you imagine would give you a happy ending?
40. What are the biggest insights you have about your own life and experience as a result of reading *Catbird*?
41. Why does Barbara feature a voice lesson in the **Coda**?

## Themes for Further Discussion

1. Feeling left out, furious, or sad in childhood
2. Feeling like a pretender instead of a professional
3. Growing up in a household where religion mattered
4. Having issues with self-image, mental health, or invasive thoughts
5. Being shaped by childhood passion
6. Being shaped by dysfunctional parents
7. Being dramatically affected by timing or a random event
8. Wanting to rewind the tape of your narrative
9. Being overly eager to please
10. Moving forward and making it better

## Thoughts

