



The Adventures of Flash Jackson

By William Kowalski
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Introduction William Kowalski's third novel takes readers back to the same quirky rural community that figured prominently in his two earlier books, a world magnificently carved out of the region's rich history and lore, and tinged with the mystical properties of its people, plants, and animals. This time his heroine is a seventeen-year-old tomboy named Haley Bombauer -- otherwise known as "Flash Jackson." When we first meet Haley, she is recovering from a severely broken leg -- the result of her having fallen off the roof of her family's rickety old barn. All but paralyzed by an enormous cast and mind-numbing pain, Haley is miserably looking ahead at a summer bereft of the activities she enjoys most: riding her beloved horse, climbing trees, hunting and fishing, roaming the woods and pastures near her home. But worst of all are the limitations imposed on her alter ego, Flash. This "stuntman trapped inside of a female body" gives Haley the strength not only to be opinionated, obstinate, and decidedly *un-ladylike*; he is also her relief from the pain of losing her adoring father; the awkwardness of being different from other girls her age; and her anxiety about carving out a life for herself in the future. Flash helps her sort out her feelings about boys, school, and life in general. He is the force that separates Haley from her mother, whom she perceives as weak and aimless since her husband's death.

In fact, Haley's mother seems to stand for everything Haley, and Flash, refuse to be, and thus becomes the target for her own general dissatisfaction at having been born female. There is one more unique aspect to Haley's life: she is the granddaughter of the "witch of the woods." A Mennonite healer who has lived all her life apart from society, Grandma is a cantankerous, troubling presence in Haley's life. Her home is a primitive shack deep in the forest, but her healing powers are known far and wide. Although she grew up in this shack, Haley's mother gladly traded that life for one that was more civilized, and she rejected the old woman's magical practices. Although Haley is not close with her grandmother, she understands that she has inherited some of the old woman's powers. It is not until she meets her spiritual match, Miss Elizabeth Powell, that Haley truly comprehends the power she possesses. Prim and proper, but with an thrilling personal history that belies her gentility, Miz Powell shows Haley new ways at looking at all kinds of things: from the ramblings of her mentally unbalanced friend, Frankie, to the advantages of being a woman in a man's world. Most importantly, Elizabeth gives Haley a framework for understanding who -- or what -- Flash Jackson really is, what he represents, and what he can do for Haley. Unfortunately, the Manville community is filled with people who don't see the things the same way that Miz Powell does. After the death of his parents, Frankie is taken to a psychiatric hospital, where he commits suicide. Filled with despair, Haley decides it is time to for her to retreat into the woods to live with Grandma as a sort of apprentice. Cut off from most forms of civilization, Haley learns how to take care of herself with only the most basic necessities. By watching the wordless old woman and following her about as she performs the backbreaking chores that make up her ascetic existence, Haley learns the value of silence and observation. She learns the names and medicinal uses of the hundreds of plants populating the woods outside her grandmother's shack. She learns to get along without plumbing, electricity, even clothing. And she befriends every living thing around her, from the most insignificant weed to the enormous bear that appears to be courting her. After a year in the woods, Haley is a feral being herself, convinced she does not need civilization, and living openly and completely as Flash Jackson. It is not until she is forced to leave the forest and her grandmother that Haley understands that the power she derives from being Flash is not only in her head -- it is in her body, heart and soul. Over the course of the novel Haley develops from an unusual adolescent into an extraordinary young woman. While her time in the woods satisfies her desire to prove her strength in the face of even the harshest conditions, it is her return home to the people she has grown to love that teaches her the most about herself. She finally accepts the fact that being independent doesn't mean you can't rely on others from time to time. She understands that her gender can be a source of unlimited, uncommon strength. And she realizes that being a woman, having a family, and loving others doesn't mean that she has to lose Flash Jackson. On the contrary, as she embarks on a completely new set of challenges, Haley -- and Flash -- are stronger and better than ever. **Questions for Discussion**

1. Do you agree with Haley that "Life as a girl is pretty bad, all things considered. Seems like you can't just do what you want -- you have to do what other folks want you to do, or they might think ill of you"? (p. 13) How does the older Haley change her assessment of girlhood?
2. Haley has three role models: her mother, Miss Powell, and her Grandmother. What does each of these women do for Haley? Have you ever had a role model who changed your life in some significant way?
3. "Fear is a useless emotion," says Miss Powell, "One that will map your life out for you if you let it." Do you agree with this?
4. Haley thinks of her grandmother as someone who, like Thoreau, lives deliberately, or as Haley puts it, "Living like you meant it, doing everything yourself and not relying on anybody else to help you." (p. 20) How might the meaning of that term changed for Haley by the end of the novel?
5. When Haley's grandmother looks into the bowl to determine Haley's future, she utters two statements. Pay attention and Don't break rules. Does this turn about to be good advice for Haley? Is it good advice in general?
6. Before she meets Miss Powell, Haley thinks of her alter ego, Flash Jackson, as a kind of superhero, a "stuntman trapped in a female body." How does her image of Flash Jackson change over the course of the novel? Is Flash still a superhero?
7. Why do you think Frankie is so important to Haley? What does he represent to her?
8. During one of his "episodes," Frankie tells Haley about his plans for a theater. "People from the whole world can come right here," he tells her, "And they can get on stage and tell everyone their story, and then things will be okay again. People will understand each other." Why is this idea so appealing to Haley? How would you envision such a theater? Which of the novel's characters would benefit from the chance to tell his or her story?
9. Although Haley's grandmother rarely speaks to her, Haley learns to decipher the wisdom that the old woman is passing on to her. One of the most striking lessons is that "there was no secret; there was no hidden meaning. There was only what was right in front of your nose." (178) How would you apply this wisdom to Haley's experiences in the woods? How might you apply it to your own life?
10. What did you think of Haley and Adam's encounter in the woods? Do you think Haley's first sexual experience was a positive one?
11. In the woods, Haley comes as close to living like an animal as any human can. What does she learn about the difference between humans and animals? What kinds of relationships does she form with the other living things in the woods, especially Bear? How does her pregnancy affect her experience in the woods?
12. "If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have come home," says Haley about the two drug runners whose plane she discovers in the woods. "I had been found out because I was acting out of compassion, but it had all been wasted on those two. I should have let

them rot out there. Then Bear would still be alive, and I would still be in my own little paradise. Leaning. Talking to the Tree People." (268) What is significant about the fact that Haley is discovered as the result of an unselfish act, an act which in turn resulted in the death of Bear?

13. The novel ends with the birth of Haley's child -- a boy. What kind of childhood do you think he'll have? What kind of mother will Haley be? How do you think her healing powers and her attitudes toward gender and society will shape her child's life? What kind of relationship will she have with Adam?

14. Do you have a "Flash Jackson" in your life? If so, how has this persona affected choices you've made, for better or worse?