

North of Normal

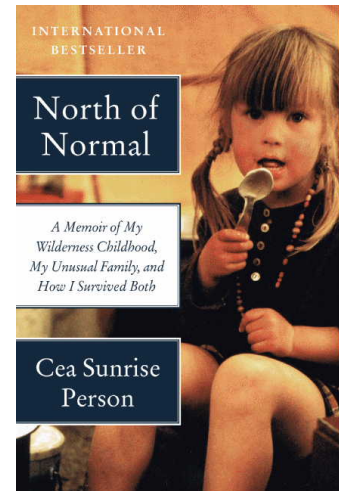
Harper Paperbacks

By Cea Sunrise Pearson

ISBN: 9780062289872

Introduction

In the late 1960s, Cea Sunrise Person's subversive family fled to the Canadian wilderness to grow pot, embrace free love, and live off the land. A riveting memoir of growing up off the grid amid multiple generations of dysfunction, *North of Normal* chronicles one woman's journey to reclaim her life on her own terms.



Determined to abandon civilization for a hand-to-mouth existence in the wild, Cea Sunrise Person's charismatic grandfather Papa Dick uproots the Person clan from suburban California to the forests of Canada when she is just a baby. Together with her teenage mother, Michelle—her father long gone—Cea will spend the next decade of her life living in and out of canvas tipis with neither electricity nor running water, at the mercy of fierce storms, food shortages, and an array of grown-ups more interested in having a groovy time than in parenting a child.

As a young girl who knows no other world, Cea is happy enough playing in the meadows and snowshoeing behind the grandfather she idolizes. But for Michelle, one crucial element is missing: a man. When Michelle strikes out to look for love, spinning from one boyfriend to the next, Cea is forced along for the ride—and into a harsh awakening. Consumed by a desire for a more normal life, she begins to question both her highly unusual world and the hedonistic woman at its center. But the escape she finds, a career as an internationally successful model, brings its own challenges.

Shocking, heartbreaking, yet often funny, and infused with warmth toward her damaged family, *North of Normal* is Person's singular story of her desire to live life on her own terms—no matter what it takes. Her journey of self-discovery and acceptance, which comes full circle after she has children of her own, is profoundly moving. Eloquently navigating the minefields of regret, longing, and family, *North of Normal* celebrates the strength we all carry within us to shape our own destiny.

Questions for Discussion

1. Clearly Cea's normal changed substantially from the time she was born to her teen years to adulthood. Describe how your own normal has changed since your childhood.
2. Do you think Grandma Jeanne was genuinely happy living in the wilderness, or was she just going along with her husband's wishes?

3. The Person family certainly had their share of tribulations. Aside from Dane and Jessie, do you think the rest of the family—Michelle, Jan, Papa Dick and Grandma Jeanne—suffered from mental illness?
4. *North of Normal* is a story of resilience. Do you think Cea was born resilient, or did she become so out of necessity? What about our own children today—do you think they need a high dose of adversity to become resilient?
5. At one point in the book, Cea's paternal grandparents offer to raise Cea, but Michelle refuses. As unprepared for motherhood as she was, why do you think she refused? And why do you think Cea's father didn't try harder to "rescue" Cea from her circumstances? Do you think Cea would have been better off in foster care?
6. What do you think of Karl? Was he a danger-crazed narcissist, or a man who genuinely cared for Cea and was doing the best he could to provide for her and Michelle?
7. Why do you think Cea felt so conflicted about being molested by Barry? Why didn't she see herself as the victim and him as the perpetrator?
8. What do you think of the way Michelle was raised by her parents? Was it a healthy, all-accepting environment, or over-permissive?
9. Cea's view of Papa Dick changed significantly from childhood to adulthood. Describe the events that caused this change, and if you think she was justified in her feelings.
10. The theme of survival is multilayered in the book. What do you think has been the most important survival lesson in your own life?
11. Which character in the book made you the angriest? Who did you feel had the best intentions?
12. What did you think about Papa Dick's philosophy of living without fear? Is it foolishness or something to strive for?
13. Cea often felt like she didn't fit in. Name a time in your life you either felt like you did not fit in or felt for someone else who didn't. If you noticed it, did you do anything about it?
14. Cea was lucky that she had the physical requirements for becoming a model. If she hadn't, do you think she would have languished with her family, or found another way to escape them?
15. Why do you think that Cea didn't fall into any of the typical pitfalls of the modeling industry (ie drugs, alcohol, casual sex) in her teens? And why do you think she succumbed and struggled with all of them later, in her mid and late twenties?
16. Why do you think Cea didn't try to repair relations with her family members, and vice-versa, until her early thirties?
17. Of all the trials Cea went through, which do you think the most difficult was for her, and why?

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18. Do you think Cea would have been more or less successful in her career had she been raised by a more conventional family?
 19. What do you think about moving an entire family to the wilderness? Would you ever attempt an experiment like that, even for a short time?
 20. What was it about this book that resonated with you the most?