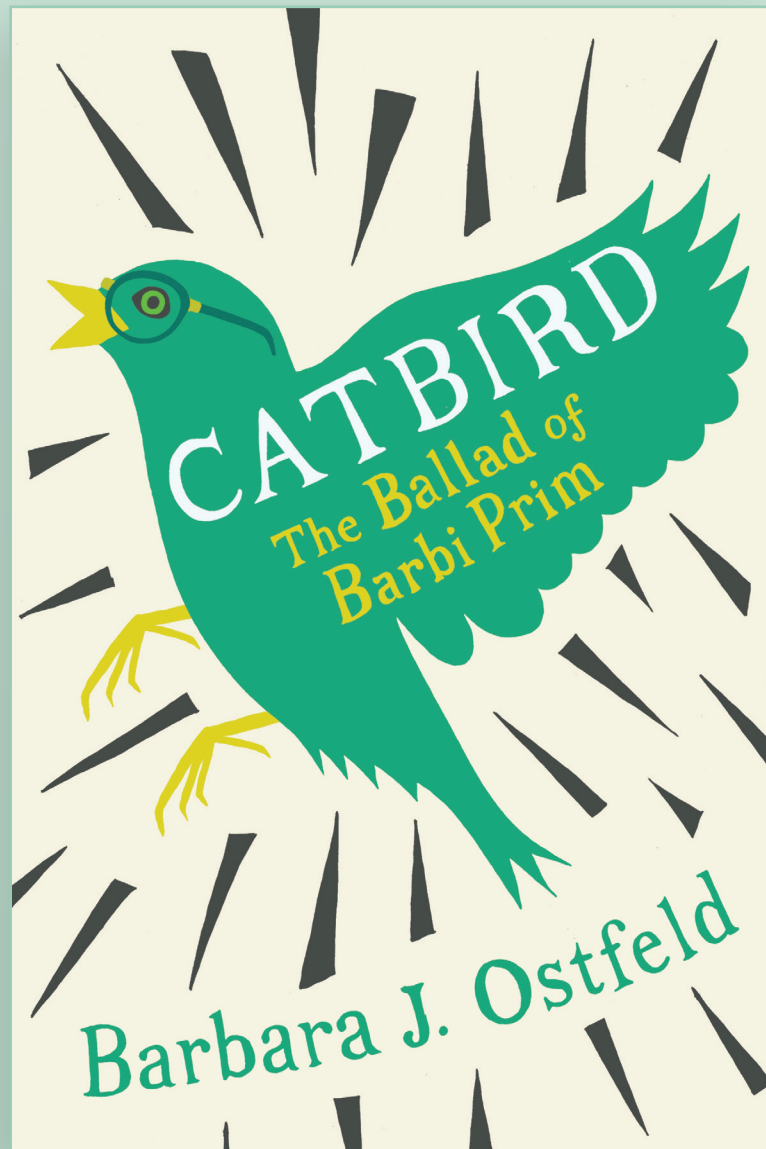


A Reading Guide for Book Clubs

# *CATBIRD* *The Ballad of Barbi Prim*



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*catbirdbook.com*

# CATBIRD *The Ballad of Barbi Prim*

TRIGGER WARNING: This reading guide contains questions involving sexual trauma and violence, which may be triggering for survivors.

## Questions

1. At the beginning of **Stanza 1, “Ditty,”** we meet a very young girl who is already aware of her emotions. What emotions do you recall from early childhood?
2. In what ways do her parents’ idiosyncrasies influence her? How did your family members influence you?
3. What roles do her elementary school and her synagogue play in this stage in her life? What do you remember about your grade school experience? About religion at that time in your life?
4. Eight-year-old Barbi describes her appearance using adjectives like “chunky,” “big,” and “frizzy.” How would you have described yourself at that age? As an adult, what would you say to a child who describes herself with negative adjectives? If you could talk to your childhood self too, what would you say?
5. By **Stanza 2, “Tune,”** Barbara is thinking more about her body and her appearance. How does her body image affect her? How did yours affect you as a teen?
6. Why did Barbara cut herself? Have you ever done something for similar reasons?
7. How does her childhood understanding of herself strike you as an adult reader? Did you have a self-image that needed repair?
8. In **Stanza 3, “Psalm,”** we follow Barbara to college/seminary. In what ways does this unique undergraduate experience influence her actions and her thinking? What experiences influenced you when you were a young adult?
9. To what extent does she feel responsible for being raped? Have you ever assumed blame for something that was actually out of your control? How did this affect you?

## Thoughts



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10. Why doesn't Barbara report being raped? How did this vignette and the rest of her story affect your thoughts about when—or if—rape survivors report?
11. By **Stanza 4, "Canticle,"** Barbara's obsessions revolve around her infertility. Have you ever obsessed about something?
12. What are some of the stressors that she encounters in her work? Are yours sometimes similar to hers?
13. In your work life, are you motivated by a desire to please?
14. What is your reaction to Dan's arrest and Barbara's response?
15. What decisions does Barbara make that begin to propel her up and out of despair? Have you made similar choices in order to move forward out of your own sadness or anger?
16. In **Stanza 5, "Romance,"** Barbara looks to a loving relationship for support and comfort. In what ways does therapy help her learn to rely more on her own strength and less on winning the affection of others? Have you ever been so invested in a relationship that you ignore your own smarts?
17. Why does she detail the domestic dramas that take place as the Balaban and the Gertz children begin to encounter each other? Can you relate?
18. At what point do you think she begins to see herself as important just as herself? Is this something you've struggled to do too?
19. Why is **Stanza 6, "Idyll,"** given such an exalted name?
20. Barbara feels bad about the mistakes she made as a younger parent. She makes two references to Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, in this stanza. Where do your thoughts go when you think about repentance?
21. Throughout *Catbird*, Barbara mentions whether her mouth is open or closed. Is this a woman's issue? How do you decide when to speak up or speak out? Has this changed for you over time?

## Thoughts



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22. In **Stanza 7, “Recapitulation,”** Barbara writes about retiring: painting, playing, tap-dancing, friendships, and caring for elderly parents. What changes do you think you’ll undergo when you retire? If you’re retired, how are Barbara’s concerns and experiences similar to and different from your own?
23. 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?
24. If you could give one piece of advice to children of any age, including adult children, what would it be?
25. What are the biggest insights you have about your own life and experience of yourself as a result of reading *Catbird*?

## Thoughts

