Discussion Questions

1. Early on in *We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves*, the character Rosemary Cooke tells the reader that she will start her story "in the middle." Why is it important to her to skip the beginning?

2. Rosemary recounts many memories of the chimpanzee Fern and their brief life together. How were she and Fern, in the language of the novel, "Same" and "NotSame"? What does their relationship suggest about the compatibility of humans and primates? How are humans different from other animals?

3. How did being co-raised with a chimpanzee impact Rosemary's development? In what ways was she different from other, "normal" children? How does she still differ from them to this day?

4. Consider Rosemary's father and mother. Are they good parents? Should they have handled Fern's leaving any differently? If so, how?

5. Each member of the Cooke family was dramatically indeed, traumatically affected by the loss of Fern. Did they share a personal sense of guilt? Of regret? Of responsibility for what happened? If so, how did these emotions manifest themselves in each family member? How do their responses enrich our understanding of these people?

6. What is your opinion of Rosemary's brother, Lowell Cooke? Are his extreme views and actions at all justified? Does he truly have Fern's well-being at heart?

7. How does Harlow Fielding's whirlwind entrance into Rosemary Cooke's world alter Rosemary's trajectory through life?

8. Think about the significance of memory and storytelling in the novel. How is Rosemary's memory and, consequently, her narrative affected by the emotional trauma she has experienced?

9. Consider Harlow Fielding and Ezra Metzger's failed attempt to liberate monkeys from the primate center, both the motivations of these co-
conspirators and the outcome itself. Was their mission in any way an admirable act? How were Harlow and Ezra's intentions different or similar to Lowell's?

10. Do you think Rosemary comes to find peace with her family history by the end of We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves?

11. Is animal experimentation ever justified? If so, under what circumstances?

(Questions issued by publisher.)
Q.
This book was inspired in part by a real-life experiment in the 1930s, in which two scientists, a husband-and-wife team, tried to raise a baby chimpanzee in their home as if she were human, along with their own child. That experiment didn’t last long; there was a rumor that their infant son soon began adopting chimp behaviors. Your own father, like the psychologist father in your novel, was an Indiana University professor who studied animal behavior. But it was your daughter who raised the question that became the seed for this novel. How did all these pieces come together for you?
A.
I began arguing with my father about animal intelligence when I was about six years old. His conclusions were based on a career of cautious, scientifically collected data; mine were based on my personal observations of the family dogs and cats, birds and rats. You might have thought that I would have developed some humility at some point, bowed to his greater expertise. But that just shows how little you know me.
In many ways, this book represents my latest salvo in that long-running argument. I deeply regret that my father is no longer here to answer back. I deeply regret that he didn’t live to see my daughter’s work on the development of diving and foraging behaviors in sea lions. The family is rich in animal behaviorists. Also in teachers, arguably much the same thing.

Q.
How many accounts are there of chimps being raised like human babies? How closely did you base your story on these accounts?

A.
When I began thinking about the book, I was intimidated by how little I knew about chimps; I consoled myself that I did know quite a lot about psychologists. So I read all the accounts of cross-fostered chimps that I could find and, yes, there are several of these. Many of them are referenced in my novel: The Ape and the Child is about the Kelloggs. Next of Kin is about Washoe. Viki Hayes is The Ape in Our House. The Chimp Who Would Be Human is Nim Chimpsky. There is a very disturbing book by Maurice Temerlin called Lucy: Growing Up Human. I read a ton of other stuff as well, about chimps and bonobos in labs, in the wild, on preserves. I know I’m pushing the limits in many ways, but I wanted Fern’s behaviors to be as plausible as I could make them, so I depended on these non-fiction accounts. I also took a “chimposeum” at the Chimpanzee and Human Communication Institute in Ellensburg, Washington and got to observe the chimps in residence there.
Q.

Why do you begin this story in the middle?

A.

The short answer is that there was no other way Rosemary, my narrator, could have told it.

The longer answer is found in a point her brother Lowell makes when he talks to her about their father’s work. Lowell complains that their father, in his careful, scientific way, started by assuming Fern’s difference from humans. This put the onus on Fern to prove herself at every point. Lowell says it would have been just as careful and scientific to start at the other end, assume Fern’s similarities to human children and demand the proof of difference. It would have been more Darwinian, he says, to start with an assumption of kinship.

I wanted the book to start with the assumption of kinship in that same way. I wanted the reader to assume the similarities, before looking for the differences. In order to accomplish that, I felt I had to talk about Fern first as a sister and only later as a chimpanzee.

Q.

What is Rosemary’s father, a university professor of psychology, hoping to accomplish by raising Fern with his own children? What is the role of Rosemary’s mother in the story?

A.

Since Rosemary remains uncertain of her father’s goals, I too remain uncertain of her father’s goals.

Ostensibly it was an experiment in nature vs nurture – what would Fern be capable of if she were raised as human, especially in the area of language? But as the daughter of a psychologist, I can tell you that the thing ostensibly being studied is never the thing being studied. Rosemary suspects that she and not Fern was the real subject of the experiment – that her father was not trying to raise a chimp who could talk to humans, but rather a human who could talk to chimps. But Rosemary is very angry at her father when she thinks this and she is probably being unfair. Probably.

Rosemary’s mother was an equal partner in the experiment though Rosemary is reluctant to admit this, feeling protective and defensive in the face of her mother’s complete collapse.
Q.

As Rosemary ponders her relationship with Fern, she wonders whether the experiment of raising them together reveals more about the nature of humans than the nature of chimps. How so? In what ways is Fern more advanced than Rosemary in their earliest years?

A.

As I researched these experiments, I was struck by how long it took for someone to note that, if we were interested in chimps and communication, it was more relevant to ask how they communicated with each other than how well they could learn to communicate with us. To remove the human from the center of these “chimp experiments” took about a century. In all that time there was little to suggest that the fault might be ours for not understanding rather than theirs for not making us understand. The primacy of the human and the priority given to human forms of intelligence and communication was largely unquestioned.

Chimps develop much more quickly than humans and, until around the age of two, are more advanced in every conceivable way.

Q.

In school, Rosemary is taunted by her classmates for being a “monkey girl,” but in fact she herself realizes that she has unconsciously taken on certain chimp traits. What are some of these?

A.

The classic chimp traits she attributes to herself are outlined on her kindergarten report card where she is described as impulsive, possessive, and demanding. She has a hard time keeping her hands to herself and she tends to see the space around her vertically as well as horizontally. Although she cannot climb the way her sister Fern does, she sees the world as climbable.

Q.
Rosemary’s brother, Lowell, becomes an animal rights activist in response to losing Fern. He takes part in several illegal actions to liberate animals and is hunted by the police. What do you think of the animal rights movement as a whole, and of the small part of it that participates in such actions?

A.

I think these are very hard questions to answer and I hope my novel represents my own complicated feelings better than a more reductive answer here will do. I believe in science and in medical research. I eat meat. But I also believe that our food industries as well as our animal research facilities, not to even mention cosmetics, involve redundant and indefensible cruelties. The idea of animals raised only to lives of utter misery is a horrifying one.

I guess what I believe is that things should be done in the open. If we can’t bear to look at what we are doing, then we shouldn’t be doing it. Of course, this precept reaches far beyond our relationship with our fellow animals into our politics, our environmental policies, our wars, and our prisons. A lot of what the animal rights activists do is simply make us look. I’m all in favor of that.

Q.

What does the knowledge about chimps that Rosemary gains in college reveal about human gender relations, patriarchy, religion, and violence?

A.

Nothing revealed, many things suggested. The differences between chimps and bonobos in these areas are stark and we share approximately the same percentage of DNA with both. Plus our understanding of both is continually evolving. But it is instructive from time to time to remember that humans are primates and to view our behaviors through that lens. Look around at our hierarchical institutions – the boardrooms, the diocese, our town halls, and bureaucracies. You’ll see lot of posturing and chest-thumping, a stylized tango of dominance displays. I agree with Rosemary’s father when he says that the only way to make sense of the US Congress is to look at it as a 200-year primate study.

Q.
Rosemary’s experiences with Fern raise a number of philosophical and psychological issues that go to the heart of what it means to be human, or so it was traditionally thought – issues like solipsism, theory of mind, and episodic memory. Can you elaborate on this a little?

A.

It seems to me that every time we think we’ve narrowed in on what the crucial difference between humans and the rest of the animals is, we turn out to be wrong again. I remember when man was the tool-using animal. Now we know that many animals use tools. Chimps have a theory of mind. Scrub jays evidence episodic memory. We have underestimated our fellow animals at every turn, mainly by being unable to see beyond ourselves. It would be nice if we could stop doing that.

Q.

Fern, like other chimps, is able to use sign language at quite a high level, although she cannot speak, while Rosemary speaks a lot as a child, but goes relatively silent in her adolescence. What role does language and talking play in this novel?

A.

Whether any chimp has used sign language at a high level is still controversial. Fern has a decent vocabulary, but that’s different from being able to communicate complex matters. She and Rosemary appear to understand each other quite well, but how much of that comes from Fern and how much is Rosemary imposing and imagining Fern’s side of the communication is also an open question.

I conceived of the novel as being all about language, who talks and who doesn’t. Who is heard and who isn’t. What can be said and by whom, and what can’t be. As a young child, Rosemary believed her talking was valuable so she did a lot of it. When Fern is sent off, Rosemary learns it isn’t valuable; she learns to be silent. But by the end of the novel, her ability to talk is important again, crucial, in fact, as her brother and her sister need their story told and Rosemary is the only one who can do this.

Q.
Heartbreakingly, Fern has to live under terrible conditions for many years after she is taken away from the Cookes. Have living conditions for chimps in institutions improved in recent years? Are there adequate facilities for them all?

A.

There are an estimated 2000 chimpanzees living in the US today, in labs, in zoos, in homes, in sanctuaries. I would say there’s been a great movement toward improvement overall, but individually their circumstances vary greatly. There are now a number of organizations dedicated to finding appropriate care and space for those chimps retired from the labs and entertainment industry, but this is an expensive endeavor. The sanctuaries are always at capacity. Plus those chimpanzees who’ve been taken early from their mothers and raised in largely human environments or in isolation, will find joining chimp society to be difficult at best.

Public awareness and public donations are critical. Nim Chimpsky was saved from the medical labs by a public outcry. Also the astronaut chimps.

A great place to donate money is Save the Chimps, which appears to be a very effective organization dealing with exactly this. CNN did a show last year on their careful, decade-long relocation of the chimps from the Coulston Foundation (shut down after three of their chimpanzees died when the heat in their cages hit 140 degrees) to a sanctuary in Florida.

Q.

In 2011, as you write, the National Institutes of Health changed its policy toward the use of chimps in medical and behavioral experiments. From now on, the NIH will support only those very few chimp studies that are absolutely necessary for human health, and that can be conducted in no other way. How will this change the situation of chimps in this country?

A.

This is excellent news (the US was one of only two countries in the world still using chimps in experiments) as long as good homes can be found for the retired research subjects. There is, of course, a shortfall in the money needed to relocate these chimps to sanctuaries. It looks possible that many will have to stay at the labs even as the experiments (and grant money) come to an end.
Q.

There have been a number of incidents in recent years in which chimps have attacked humans, most notably the one in Connecticut where a woman lost her face and hands. Can chimps really live closely with people in the long term? Is it cruel to socialize them with humans when they will eventually have to be moved into a different environment, as they grow bigger and stronger?

A.

Chimps are extremely dangerous animals, particularly the males. They can be managed as children, but when they hit adolescence, they are so very much stronger than humans, they can no longer be controlled. So no, they cannot live with people over the long term and yes, it is cruel to raise them as humans. They live for about 50 years in captivity and they become uncontrollable at 10 or earlier. For most of their lives then, living with humans is not going to be an option. They should be left with their mothers.

Q.

What is the situation of chimps in the wild in Africa? Are their numbers increasing or decreasing? What are their long-range prospects?

A.

Chimps suffer from the same habitat encroachment as every other wild animal. Their populations have declined by 66% in the last 30 years and both the common chimp and the bonobo are classified as endangered.

Q.

The epigraphs throughout your novel are taken from a short story by Franz Kafka called “A Report for an Academy,” whose narrator is an ape. How did this story inform your own?

A.

Kafka’s story is about a captive ape who must learn to behave as human in order to win for himself some small measure of freedom. It is a flexible story as most of our stories with animal characters are. What is Black Beauty
about? Horses? Slaves? Women? This is an intriguing part of the puzzle, the tangle of our relationship to other animals, that so much of our literature, especially that aimed at children (which Kafka’s story certainly is not) involves talking animals. The Wind in the Willows, Charlotte’s Web, Winnie the Pooh – these are all books my parents read to me as a child and I still hear my father’s voice in Roo and Templeton and Toad. As children we are encouraged to feel a great sympathy for animals and then expected to cast that off as part of growing up.

Except that these animal characters are not really animals at all. It is unlikely that Kafka was actually writing about apes in “Report to an Academy.” But the story is too pertinent to my purposes not to ignore the metaphor.

Q.

What do you hope readers take away from this novel?

A.

A century ago the anti-vivisectionists battled with the medical community over the use of animal subjects in experiments both critical and trivial, and lost. Since then any objection to such experiments has been seen as sentimental, childish, and unprogressive. My novel is my attempt to think about this again. Also to ask what it means to be a human animal. I’ve got no easy answers and I’m not trying to proselytize. I hope readers will also be interested in thinking about these things.

The book was a great excuse to look at some of the recent, incredible work being done on animal cognition. Apparently the military toyed with the idea of using crows in the hunt for Osama bin Laden, because of their superior facial recognition skills. I watched you-tube videos of crows sledding and persuaded myself I was doing research. Funny cat videos! Octopi escaping their tanks. Chimps demonstrating their amazing abilities with short-term memory. Elephants painting. Kathryn Hunter’s incredible performance as Red Peter in “Kafka’s Monkey.”

The world is a complicated, surprising, often horrible and often beautiful place. I just hope we can keep it. We’re not the only ones who live here.

Source: http://karenjoyfowler.com/
The Other Sister
By BARBARA KINGSOLVER
WE ARE ALL COMPLETELY BESIDE OURSELVES
By Karen Joy Fowler

To experience this novel exactly as the author intended, a reader should avoid the flap copy and everything else written about it. Including this review. The last writers to be unscathed by spoilers were probably the Victorians, who pounded out the likes of “Great Expectations” in weekly, serialized installments. No reviewer could blow the surprise of a convict benefactor or Miss Havisham’s cobwebby cake when these were yet unwritten. But in modern times, literary fiction presents a conundrum: The more craftily constructed its suspense, the more it tempts its advocates — in the interest of airtime — to reach into a serious tale and pull out something resembling a tabloid headline. Such as: “Girl and Chimp Twinned at Birth in Psychological Experiment.” That’s the big reveal in Karen Joy Fowler’s “We Are All Completely Beside Ourselves,” a novel so readably juicy and surreptitiously smart, it deserves all the attention it can get.

Holding back that surprise until the book’s second quarter is no small authorial feat. But the chimp pops right up in the publisher’s promotional material, and ducking it here would disallow mention of many elements that inform this sly work of art, including science and history.

The plot turns on a volatile moment in behavioral psychology, the late 1970s, when Skinnerian dogmatists were duking it out with proponents of a more nuanced, evolutionary grasp of animal behavior. Primate subjects were prized for the ways they resembled humans in mirror-identity tests, language acquisition and more, but could still be dispatched as property at the end of the experimental day. Meanwhile, a fledgling animal rights movement was starting to count the bodies.

The novel’s narrator, Rosemary Cooke, claims to care about exactly none of this. As the daughter of a psychology professor at Indiana University, she’s an ideal informant: witty, skeptical and duly damaged. Her snappy storytelling and occasional wisecracking use of the second person engage the reader-observer directly. No surprise there, as she has lived an observed life from the get-go, in a long household experiment with an adopted chimpanzee for a twin sister. Where other kids had preschool and baby sitters, Rosemary had lab exercises and grad students, and the omnipresent, amber-eyed, diaper-wearing Fern, a hairy, wiry whirlwind of a sister who funnels her lips and scales
furniture in a trice and lounges on the tops of doors. Even as a toddler, Rosemary knew their developmental milestones were being compared — ad infinitum, with footnotes. While hopelessly outmatched in strength and dexterity, Rosemary could win any game involving the gift of gab. Fern learned a competent sign language vocabulary but had little use for it because Rosemary spoke up for both of them. Inhaling Fern’s every impulse, she was always the first to know that her sister wanted ice cream or a hat. (As a condition of the twin experiment, she’d get one too.) Rosemary became such a talker that her endless stories wore out her parents. “Skip the beginning. Start in the middle,” her father advised, counsel that had little effect on a sunny, loquacious child.

Until age 5, when she was sent away for a few weeks at Grandma’s, not for the usual blessed-event reason but the opposite: she returned to find that she hadn’t gained a sibling but lost one. Abruptly, inexplicably, the household was empty of Fern, along with the jolly cadre of grad students and all mention of the experiment. Rosemary grieved for her companion and her intangible sense of purpose as the much-praised interpreter of her special sib’s every whim.

In a story with many beginnings, this is the molten core: a family’s implosion with grief. The father becomes a taciturn drunk, his great experiment a debacle. The mother retreats to stricken silence from which she seems no more likely to recover than any mother who’s lost a child. Rosemary’s beloved older brother strikes out bitterly on a path of no return. The children are told that Fern has been sent to a “farm.” No, they may not go visit; it would disrupt Fern’s transition as she learns to socialize with her own kind. Rosemary is expected to do the same. She’s thrust wide-eyed into kindergarten, where the other kids instantly sniff out the classmate whose manners and sense of personal space were forged in simian territory. She is branded “the monkey girl,” never mind the difference — obvious to 5-year-old Rosemary — between monkeys and apes. She attributes her ostracism to the “uncanny-valley response,” wherein people respond ever more positively to robots or images that approximate human likeness, until a breaking point where the almost-but-not-quite human gives us the creeps. Thanks to her years of “baby see, baby do,” there’s something not-quite-human about Rosemary, and she knows it.

The best she can do is survive a friendless childhood and head off to the University of California, Davis, to put half a continent between herself and her reputation. There she
finds dorm-mates lobbing stories in an incessant contest of “whose family is the weirdest,” a game Rosemary deeply wishes she hadn’t won by a mile. She learns to keep her mouth shut.

She seems doomed to isolation until the day she collides with Harlow, a drama major whose dish-smashing breakup with her boyfriend in the cafeteria manages to get both herself and Rosemary arrested. Sensible folk would run from Harlow, with her abundant dark hair, wiry energy and zero sense of personal space, but Rosemary is helpless before her charms. An arrest record and endangered G.P.A. are small prices to pay for a friendship that makes her feel whole again for the first time in years.

Technically, the novel begins here: in the middle, as her father advised. In Chapter 1 we meet 22-year-old Rosemary, strangely lonely, with a baffling compulsion to imitate this new friend with the wrecking-ball agenda. Rosemary is circumspect about her sad parents, her runaway brother and the sister everyone still misses, introducing herself as someone who lost a sister, period. Fair enough. Subtract the chimp, and her family looks like many others in their lifelong, imperfectly realized quest to reconstitute themselves and atone for old sins. For Rosemary, the hard part is remembering. Gradually, she nets in the past through flashback chapters redacting the family heartbreak. We learn that she is oddly blank on the details of Fern’s departure. And that her brother blames her for Fern’s removal from the household. The brother who is now wanted by the F.B.I., and was last seen in Davis, Calif. Which is the real reason Rosemary came there to college. Old secrets emerge, unspoiled by this review.

Fowler, best known for her novel “The Jane Austen Book Club,” is a trustworthy guide through many complex territories: the historical allure and dicey ethics of experimental psychology, not to mention academic families and the college towns of Bloomington and Davis. (It’s worth noting that Fowler’s father was at one time a psychology professor at Indiana University, studying animal behavior.) The novel’s fresh diction and madcap plot — swapped suitcases, a Madame Defarge ventriloquist’s dummy, lost bikes and drug-laced coed high jinks — bend the tone toward comedy, but it never mislays its solemn raison d’être. Monkeyshines aside, this is a story of Everyfamily in which loss engraves relationships, truth is a soulful stalking and coming-of-age means facing down the mirror, recognizing the shape-shifting notion of self.

Source: The New York Times