

Reading and Discussion Guide
The World's Largest Man
by Harrison Scott Key

Questions for Discussion

1. Before reading the book, what qualities did you think were essential in a father? Did they change after reading about Harrison's experiences with his father?
2. Given Pop's stern and even violent interaction with his sons, how do you explain his seemingly natural sensitivity with babies?
3. Storytelling was a significant part of the Key family and life in the South. What role does storytelling play in a family? A culture?
4. Harrison admits to wanting family stories that "might involve some secret sin, a gun, fisticuffs in a baptismal." What might be the draw of such a legacy?
5. Pop's behavior as a father—from loving to violent—is described at one point simply as "the human heart behaving as it will, when set loose." What might that mean?
6. Just after moving to the farmhouse, Pop "took the watercolor brush from [his son's] hand and stuck a shovel in it." How are creativity and work similar or different? What's the value of each?
7. Consider the many artistic and literary allusions throughout the book: Faulkner, Dali, Heart of Darkness, Romeo and Juliet, Kafka, Bulfinch's Mythology, etc. What does each bring to the your understanding of Harrison and his experience?
8. Two of Harrison's experiences killing animals—a dove, and, accidentally, a yearling—were particularly traumatic for him because they involved extended suffering. What do you think contributes to a child's ability to hunt or kill animals? What does it tell you about a society and the pressures of growing up?
9. Discuss the important presence and effect of Harrison's mother in his life. What valuable qualities did she possess? How was she the antithesis of his father, and yet a bolster to his actions at times?
10. Pop is described as a "man of action," as opposed to one led by "faculty of reason" or even the imagination that Harrison so values. What role should each of these play in a person's life? What's a proper balance?
11. What is the role and effect of humor in the book? How can humor and horror exist in the same passage? How—and how often—does humor function in your daily life?

12. Pop thought "a real man" didn't need "friends or holidays or even happiness." What was a real man to him?
13. What forces—intellectual, social, technological—might cause an evolution in how a culture defines manhood?
14. At one point, Harrison writes of his father, "Despite all the hitting, I knew, he was a good man." What qualities in Pop allowed him to say this? When does a good man who does some bad things cease to be good?
15. What does it mean to be a good son or daughter? Is there one way to be "good?"
16. In what ways did Harrison's experience with his father affect him as a husband? As a father himself?
17. Harrison finally feels like a father when his young daughter goes missing and is then returned, unharmed. What is it about that experience that clarifies his emotions and identity?
18. The temporary loss of their daughter also caused "something very large" to happen, "something too big to be removed...in a story." What might this mean? What are the limits of storytelling and art to express profound human emotion?
19. Harrison grew up to become quite different from his father. In what ways is he different, and what were the influences that allowed or caused him to grow up out of his father's shadow? What are some of his father's traits that he still values? Do you think children get to pick and choose the parts of their parents they want to become?