

Reading Group Guide

My Struggle

Books 1, 2, and 3

Karl Ove Knausgaard

This nerve-striking, addictive piece of hyperrealism by the Norwegian Critics' Prize—winning author of *A Time for Everything* has become a phenomenon throughout Scandinavia.

Almost ten years have passed since Karl Ove Knausgaard's father drank himself to death. Vulnerable and assailed by doubts, he is now embarking on a new novel. With an uncanny eye for detail, Knausgaard breaks down his own life story to its elementary particles, reliving memories, reopening wounds, and examining with candor the turbulence and the epiphanies that emerge from his own experience of fatherhood, the fallout in the wake of his father's death, and his visceral connection to music, art, and literature. Negotiating intimacy, love, and fear lies at the heart of his movements and mind as he moves from self-deprecation to self-absorption, from craving solitude to exposing an insatiable need for love and admiration, from alienation to harmony. Karl Ove's dilemmas strike nerves that give us raw glimpses of our particular moment in history as we witness what happens to the sensitive and churning mind of a young man trying—as if his very life depended on it—to find his place in the disjointed world around him. These Proustian masterpieces open a window into one of the most original minds writing today.

This guide is designed to enrich your discussion of *My Struggle*: Books 1, 2, and 3. We hope that the following questions will enhance your journey into Knausgaard's world.

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION FOR BOOK 1

1. *My Struggle* starts with, of all things, an extended meditation on death. Knausgaard first describes what physically happens to our bodies after we die, and then he bemoans the fact that our societies are organized in such a way as to almost completely hide death from our lives. Why would someone start a book that tells the story of his life by talking about death? Do you think Knausgaard is right when he argues that we should be more aware of death in our day-to-day thoughts?
2. Knausgaard writes that “as your perspective of the world increases not only is the pain it inflicts on you less but also its meaning.” Do you agree that getting a wider perspective

on your life reduces its ability to cause you pain? Do you feel that Knausgaard is, in part, writing *My Struggle* in order to lessen the pain his own life inflicts on him? And what do you think about the trade-off he posits, that increasing our perspective lessens life's ability to impact us?

3. The first incident Knausgaard describes in *My Struggle* is a memory in which, as an eight-year-old boy, he thinks he sees a face in the sea on the nightly news. He explicitly links this scene to Jesus Christ and Christianity, even though organized religion is rarely mentioned in *My Struggle*, and Karl Ove does not seem like a very religious character. Why might Knausgaard give religion pride of place at the very beginning of the book? How might notions of spirituality be important to this project? And how do religious issues like redemption, doubt, justice, and belief in a guiding force come into play throughout Knausgaard's story?

4. The opening scenes of Karl Ove's childhood in Book 1 are of his early adolescence; overall, the first half of Book 1 is dominated by memories from his teenage years. Why might Knausgaard want to start the tale of his life by looking at himself as a teenager? What sorts of advantages does this give him in telling the story of his relationship with his father, probably the most important relationship in *My Struggle*?

5. Adolescence is commonly thought of as a very special part of our lives, a time when we are experimenting with freedom, and in which we are discovering emotions that we learn to control as we get older. In what ways do you find Karl Ove's teenage years typical, and in what ways do you find them unique, and perhaps a little strange? Do you see any hints of the adult Karl Ove in the teenage Karl Ove?

6. Toward the beginning of the book, Knausgaard describes the lengthy and elaborate plan required to get drunk as a teenager on New Year's Eve. Why do you think he goes into such great detail in describing this night, and what does all this planning reveal about his character as a teen? How do you feel that this scene acts as a counterpoint to later in the novel, when Knausgaard must clean up after his father's alcoholism? More broadly, how do alcohol and drunkenness resonate with the image Knausgaard is building of Western societies as overly sanitized?

7. Regarding the rock 'n' roll band that he played in as a teen, Knausgaard says that they were terrible but did not realize it—to the contrary, they thought they were good, and this gave their young lives meaning. How does music provide an outlet for a wilder side of Karl Ove that he is unable to express in other areas as a teenager? What does this story say about the place literature serves in his adult life? Do you think Knausgaard has

doubts as to whether the literature he writes is really good or not, and whether it's a meaningful pursuit for his life?

8. Throughout *My Struggle*, Knausgaard frequently discusses bodily subjects that would be considered taboo by many authors; for instance, he describes how he temporarily feared as a teen that his penis was malformed, and later he describes how he was too nervous to urinate while on a date with a young woman he had a crush on. How did it make you feel to read things like this in a work of literature? And why would it be important to Knausgaard to include such details in *My Struggle*?

9. After the divorce of Karl Ove's parents, Knausgaard notes that his father begins to dress very differently, in a way that he characterizes as "soft" and "feminine." It is very different from anything he has ever experienced with his father, and it distresses and confuses him. How does this contrast with the image of his father that Knausgaard builds up throughout the rest of the book? Do you feel like this offers some clues as to the roots of the divorce? And why might Knausgaard find this distressing, even though he repeatedly details how tyrannical and abusive his father could be?

10. At the very end of part 1 of Book 1, Karl Ove is at a party with his now-divorced father and his father's new friends. Karl Ove's father is talking about a woman named Helene, whom he loved as an adolescent, and who died tragically. All this is a revelation to Karl Ove, who knew nothing about Helene growing up. During this scene, father and son are drinking together, and the teenage Karl Ove is surrounded by middle-aged people. Why do you feel that Knausgaard chose this scene to conclude part 1? And how does this scene bring together a number of the book's important themes, like intoxication, family secrets, passionate love, and the difference between the worlds of the adult and of the adolescent?

11. Part 1 of the book is all about Karl Ove's life as a teenager, as he is getting his first tastes of adulthood while his family is disintegrating. Part 2, by contrast, is about Karl Ove leaving everything he knows in Norway to move to Stockholm, become a writer, and start a family with a new woman. Why do you think that Knausgaard chose to pair these two chunks of his life? In what ways might these two stories about profound breaks from past lives and forming new ones be similar? In what important ways are they different?

12. Much of the second half of Book 1 is taken up with Karl Ove's conflicting feelings about his father's death: on the one hand, Karl Ove is very callous, at times even bordering on happy that his father has died; but on the other hand, he weeps without control and seems unable to believe his father is really dead. Did you feel that

Knausgaard effectively captured the mixture of emotions surrounding his father's death?

13. In describing the impact of his father's death, Knausgaard writes that he felt "as if I was entering a larger story than my own." Yet he undercuts the epic feel of this story with very banal details, like descriptions of eating breakfast, or the CDs in his brother's car, or even a fly buzzing around a funeral parlor. Such details drag this large story down to earth, making it feel almost dull at times. Why do you think Knausgaard does so much to give this story a feeling of conflict between great and trivial? What might this have to do with the ways in which he was processing his father's death at the time? How does this relate to Knausgaard's thoughts about the place of death in society, which he returns to periodically throughout the book?

14. In the funeral parlor, Karl Ove notices a box of Kleenex, and it makes him think of all the other families who have been right in his exact place, grieving just as he has: "you visualized all the bereaved relatives who had come here and wept in the course of the day and you realized that your grief was not unique." Why do you think we want to feel as though our grief is unique when we have suffered a serious loss? And how does this realization fit into Knausgaard's larger points about the experience of reality in modern life as something false and flattened by images?

15. As they're cleaning their grandmother's house in the aftermath of their father's death, Karl Ove and Yngve both fall prey to the fantasy that their father is actually still alive. The idea induces a terror in Karl Ove, who imagines his father will walk through the door at any moment. How does his father's death and the responsibilities it necessitates bring back the relationships of childhood? How does Karl Ove regress back to childhood behaviors, feelings, and memories? Do you think he manages to overcome them in the act of cleaning up after his father's mess?

16. Knausgaard spends a lot of time detailing the very difficult house cleaning involved in bringing his father's death to a conclusion. In what ways might this work be freeing or liberating?

17. Knausgaard describes a poet named Olav H. Hauge whom he interviewed as a teen: he explains Hauge's incredible sensitivity by saying that "he was more than eighty years old, but nothing in him had died or calcified, which actually makes life far too painful to live, that's what I think now." Do you think having parts of you "die" or "calcify" is necessary to living without debilitating emotional pain? Is Karl Ove "calcifying" as he cleans his grandmother's home?

18. Knausgaard explains that the first time he really felt like a writer was when he wrote something about his father that made himself cry. It's clear that his father's approval played an important role in his decision to become a writer. What do you think Knausgaard thinks about his father deep down? Do you think his father is portrayed sympathetically in *My Struggle*? Fairly?

19. In Book 1, Knausgaard reveals lots of very personal details, not just about himself but also about his family. The book was quite controversial when it was published in Norway, and many of Knausgaard's family and friends were angered by what he revealed in the book. Do you think Knausgaard had a right to tell his story as he wanted to? Do we all have a right to tell our life stories, for our own sake? Should he have hidden things out of respect for those close to him?

20. Officially, Knausgaard refers to *My Struggle* as a novel, although it obviously follows his life to the greatest extent possible. And, in fact, before writing *My Struggle*, Knausgaard wrote two well-received novels. In which parts of the book do you feel like Knausgaard is relying most on his talents as a novelist? How do you feel that a novelist's storytelling ability would be useful in writing a memoir? To what extent do you think that any attempt to tell a life story is like writing a novel?

21. What are your feelings about Knausgaard and this project at the end of Book 1? Do you feel like you're willing to commit to staying with this man's life through more volumes of *My Struggle*? Do you feel like this was appropriate material to cover in Book 1, and what do you expect to hear about in Book 2?

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION FOR BOOK 2

1. Book 2 starts with an extended description of the chaos that has become of Karl Ove's life, now that he has three children of his own. It is quite a break from the end of Book 1, where he was childless, uncertain of his romantic relationships, and mourning the death of his father. Why do you think Knausgaard chose to juxtapose these two versions of himself at the end of Book 1 and the start of Book 2? What does this opening say about what you can expect from Book 2, and how it will differ from Book 1? What do you think this says about the impact of family on one's life story?

2. Early on in Book 2, while at a birthday party, Karl Ove recalls how he was once upstaged by a boxer when it had been necessary to break down a bathroom door: he, Karl Ove, failed to do it, but the boxer swiftly broke it in. Karl Ove recalls this because he's trying to explain his feelings of emasculation. Why do you think having a masculine

image is so important to him? Do you find these sorts of ideas about men old-fashioned and silly, or do you think his concerns are valid?

3. The opening of Book 2 is dominated by domesticity: a child's birthday party, Karl Ove's interaction with his children, and his home life as a married father. What aspects of family life does Knausgaard choose to highlight? What does this say about his ideas of fatherhood and family? How are these informed by his own experiences with his father?

4. Things begin to shift away from Karl Ove's family life when he picks up a volume of Dostoevsky and begins to read it in a café—in fact, he gets so wrapped up in the book that he completely forgets his family obligations and nearly misses an appointment. Do you think the literary realm and the family realm are in conflict for Knausgaard? What might books offer to him that he's not getting from his family?

5. While reading Dostoevsky, Knausgaard muses that “whereas before man wandered through the world, now it is the world that wanders through man. And when meaning shifts, meaninglessness follows.” He's talking about how ideas of personal psychology and inner life have come to dominate our understanding of ourselves in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. What roles do books play in this understanding? Why might Knausgaard, as an author, be particularly attuned to the benefits and perils of a life lived through words?

6. Throughout Book 2, Knausgaard returns again and again to the story of one of his neighbors, a lonely alcoholic Russian woman who was abandoned by her husband. She terrorizes Karl Ove and his family by blaring her music at all hours and being a menacing presence in his apartment building. Why might Knausgaard have wanted to include her in this book about passion and family? How does he interact with her, or fail to? How does she act as a foil to Karl Ove's own family life?

7. Karl Ove talks about reading a copy of his friend Geir's book, *The Aesthetics of a Broken Nose*, which he describes as being about “anti-liberal” cultures. He links this book to books of other thinkers, like Michel Serres and Michel Foucault, who tried to offer reference points from outside of Western civilization so that we might evaluate our culture and think about its implicit assumptions and ideas. How is Knausgaard trying to do this in *My Struggle*? How might this be linked to his uneasiness around masculinity? Why is it important to think about such things and question society in this manner?

8. In Book 2, Knausgaard delves into his early days as a writer, which coincided with an extremely wild portion of his life. In particular, he drank too much and was prone to

blackouts and bad deeds, which may have included sleeping with a thirteen-year-old girl. This period in Karl Ove's life is highly associated with Geir and the development of their friendship as adults. How is Geir the ideal person for Karl Ove to be with at this point in his life? And how does their relationship change once Karl Ove settles down and attempts to become a family man? What role does Geir serve in Karl Ove's life?

9. In telling the story of his past, Knausgaard recalls how, while at a writers' retreat, he begins to become seduced by Linda (whom, years later, he will marry and start a family with), even though he is at that time married to a woman named Tonje. In trying to comprehend these feelings, Knausgaard writes that he remembers "thinking that I was in the middle of my life. Not life as an age, not halfway along life's path, but *in the middle of my existence*." What is the difference Knausgaard is drawing here between an "age" or "life's path" and "existence"? How does "existence" feel more fundamental and more high-stakes than the other two? Reading this, why do you think he decides to leave Tonje and try his luck again as a single man? How do such questions return to the roots of why Knausgaard wanted to write *My Struggle*?

10. In describing the passionate romance that Karl Ove falls into with Linda, Knausgaard writes about how he feared losing his independence and his writer's lifestyle, even as he wanted to be in love with her. What is the trade-off between family and freedom? How are Karl Ove's fears seen throughout the rest of Book 2? In particular, you might think about his long conversations with Geir, his descriptions of reading and writing alone, and his descriptions of family life as a married man with children.

11. Karl Ove's friend Anders has an interesting relationship to money: he has a huge capacity to earn it, but he goes through it just as fast, buying expensive items and gambling it away. His line of business is unclear, but Knausgaard says it's illegal to an extent. Anders doesn't really understand Karl Ove's values and doesn't even pretend to be interested in art, and Karl Ove respects this attitude. Why do you think Karl Ove maintains a friendship with Anders? And given that Anders makes lots of money as a scammer, and Karl Ove makes very little as a literary writer, what does this say about the sorts of things that their society values and rewards monetarily? What do you think motivates Karl Ove and Anders? Can you see any commonalities between them?

12. The birth of Karl Ove's first child, Vanja, is a major moment in the novel. He and his wife Linda exchange words during the birth that are unlike any others in Book 2. Afterward, Karl Ove continues trying to work on his second book while being a father, much as before the birth, although things are unmistakably different. How is Karl Ove's life different after the birth of Vanja? What new tensions does it introduce into his

relationship with Linda? What new things does it make him think about?

13. Musing on his life as a father, Knausgaard says that “children were life.” By contrast, he says of writing “what else was it but death? Letters, what else were they but bones in a cemetery?” Why might a writer, especially one who is writing his entire life story, call writing “bones in a cemetery”? It is often said that writing a classic novel gives you a sort of immortality, because your words will continue to live on even after you die. From that perspective, might writing be life, too? How does this differ from having a child, which also allows you to live on past your own death in a way? What do you think Knausgaard would say about immortality gained through writing?

14. Knausgaard says that when you reach forty years of age, you realize that “it was all here, banal everyday life, fully formed, and it always would be unless you did something. Unless you took one last gamble.” Do you ever feel trapped by the everyday like this? In what ways might *My Struggle* have been just this sort of gamble for Knausgaard? What might this realization that at forty one becomes saturated with banal everyday life have to do with the many, many descriptions of banal, everyday details that Knausgaard places throughout these books?

15. During Vanja’s christening, Karl Ove unexpectedly takes communion. After the incident, which he is at a loss to explain, he wonders why he did it and if that act has now made him a Christian. He goes on to reflect on the fact that the priest had been hesitant to christen his daughter because he and Linda were not married, and, moreover, because he didn’t believe in Christian religious doctrine. What does this moment say about the importance of tradition and ritual in our lives? Do you think taking communion makes Karl Ove a Christian? Do you feel that ideas of sacredness and spirituality have a place in these books, even if Knausgaard isn’t formally religious?

16. Karl Ove’s friend Geir calls him an “auditor of happiness,” which he describes like this: “If you have some success, generally something others would have died for, you just cross it off in the ledger. You’re not happy about anything.” Do you think this is a normal or abnormal way to react to success? Do you feel that this partly explains why Knausgaard is so driven to succeed? Is this a good attitude or a bad attitude for a writer/artist to have?

17. During a long conversation at a bar with Geir, Karl Ove says that when he moved to Stockholm and fell in love with Linda, he finally felt like he had been raised above the trivial matters of life. To go beyond the minutiae is something Knausgaard desires very passionately; this could be thought of as the struggle behind *My Struggle*. Why do you

think Knausgaard struggles so hard to rise above banality? Is a passionate love the only way one can attain such a feeling? Can anyone stay above the minutiae of life forever?

18. Think about the major plot points of Books 1 and 2: Karl Ove's adolescence, the death of his father, Karl Ove's marriage, and the birth of his children. How are these events linked to different stages of life? Is it inevitable that in telling your life story, you will order it around these sorts of events? Do you feel that Karl Ove's life "breaks the mold" in certain ways?

19. After reading two books about Knausgaard, what do you think of him as a person? What adjectives would you use to describe him? Do you think he's a good father? What motivates his writing?

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION FOR BOOK 3

1. At the beginning of Book 3, Knausgaard thinks all the way back to his very first memories. He covers everything he can remember from the first six years of his life in just one paragraph. What are your earliest memories? Why do you think Knausgaard waited until Book 3 to go back to the very beginning of his life?

2. Early on in this volume, Knausgaard writes that "memory is pragmatic, it is sly and artful, but not in any hostile or malicious way; on the contrary, it does everything it can to keep its host satisfied." What do you think Knausgaard means by memory's "host"? How might memory be "sly" and "artful" (but not "malicious")? How do you feel that Knausgaard's experiences writing a gigantic six-volume book about his life affected his relationship to his own memories?

3. Knausgaard fills Book 3 with incidents that paint his father as a tyrant—for instance, the time when Karl Ove is afraid to tell his father that the milk on his cereal has gone sour. Or when Karl Ove is terrified of revealing to his father that he lost a sock during swim practice. Why is he so terrified of upsetting his father in any way? Why does his father demand such obedience? How do you see this childhood trauma manifesting itself in Karl Ove's relationships and behaviors as an adult in Books 1 and 2?

4. Think of all the little details Knausgaard describes in this book: for instance, the poster of the Kawasaki 750 motorcycle on the wall in his friend's room, going to the Fina station to buy Fox and Nox, the music Karl Ove plays, the things he is given as gifts, the clothes he and his family wear. How do all these details work to build a portrait of middle-class Norwegian life in the 1970s? What sort of childhood is Knausgaard trying

to present by painting his world this way?

5. The scene in which Karl Ove must wear a girl's swimming cap to swim lessons is among many scenes in Book 3 that paint him as an effeminate boy. They also form part of a larger theme in all three volumes, wherein Knausgaard repeatedly brings up ways in which he feels that he has been feminized by the modern world. Do you find that these admissions contradict the "bad boy" image that he at other times paints of himself? Do you find that these scenes add another layer of complexity to his character, and that they make him seem more vulnerable and sympathetic as a person? And how are Karl Ove's father's reactions to these feminine tendencies yet another source of stress for their relationship?

6. In many ways, Karl Ove's childhood is reminiscent of virtually anyone's: for instance, in Book 3 he describes things like the first day of school, car trips to see his relatives, the first girl he has a crush on, and being grounded. Why is it important that Knausgaard describe experiences that will be familiar to most of his readers? And how does he talk about these memories so that they are recognizably his own, despite being common parts of a middle-class childhood?

7. Book 3 contains lengthy descriptions of Karl Ove and his friend Geir defecating in the woods. Such in-depth descriptions of bowel movements have long been taboo for novelists, and they were in fact long considered too controversial to publish at all. Why do you think descriptions of our feces have proven so distressing to the guardians of society's morals, and why do you think Knausgaard chose to break this taboo? How might such a subject be appropriate to a book that largely deals with the innocence and experiences of childhood?

8. As a child, Karl Ove tends to imagine scenarios where people who have angered him get their just deserts. He even goes so far as to imagine his own death, which he says "was generally a sweet thought at that time" because people like his father would feel regret for hurting him. Do you think of young Karl Ove as the kind of child who would have these feelings? Do you find that he still thinks like this as an adult? Do you think it's possible that writing *My Struggle* is a way of dealing with these feelings of resentment toward people who have wronged him?

9. During his description of his first crush, on Anne Lisbet, Knausgaard tries to convey the feeling of youthful discovery by writing that "everything was happening for the first time." What do you think he means by this? In what ways is childhood special because everything feels new? How does this compare with Knausgaard's depiction of adulthood?

What new feelings do we experience as adults that we don't know about as children?

10. What sorts of activities and relationships dominate Knausgaard's childhood? What things do you remember best about your childhood? Are they similar to or different from Knausgaard's? Why do you think that is?

11. Even though *My Struggle* is the story of Knausgaard's life, he has chosen to call these books "novels." This makes sense, because nobody could possibly remember all the childhood details that Knausgaard presents in Book 3, so he's obviously fictionalizing to an extent. How do you feel about the fact that Knausgaard is probably inventing a lot of the childhood details in Book 3? Do you think we all do this when remembering our childhoods? Does an author have license to invent in this way from time to time? How would things be different if someone who was a child now—with all our recording devices—chose to write his or her childhood story forty years from now?

12. Describing trips to his grandparents' house, Knausgaard writes, "history didn't exist for me when I went there as a child." What do you think he means by this? What things do you think young Karl Ove's grandparents represented for him? In what ways would his grandparents' home be very different from his own home with his parents on the island? Did you feel like this when you visited your relatives?

13. Knausgaard describes multiple trips with Geir to the trash dump, where they have strange encounters unlike any others in the book. For instance, one time they come upon some men shooting rats; another time they go in search of pornography and end up trying to stick their penises into old glass bottles. How is the dump different from any of the other places Karl Ove regularly goes as a child? Why do you think he and Geir like to go there? What sort of different rules does the dump have from the rest of their lives? Is it important to have places like this to go as a child? Do children have places like this nowadays?

14. It's quite clear that Karl Ove's relationship with his mother is very different from the one he has with his father. What is your image of his mother? Do you think his mother and his father are well suited to each other? Why do you think they married?

15. Throughout Book 3, Knausgaard paints a very negative portrait of his father. Did you find that he portrayed anything admirable about him? Do you feel that Karl Ove's father was happy with his life—his marriage, his job, his children, his achievements? How might this relate to Knausgaard's own determination to succeed as an adult?

16. Knausgaard lists many of the books he read as a child; it's a remarkably long list, and it seems like he just read and read, regardless of subject matter or genre. Why do you think he read so compulsively? What did the books offer him that he didn't get at home? Do you think all this reading was indicative of the gift for language that he would nurture later in life? What role did books play in your own childhood?

17. How does Karl Ove's life change when he moves on to secondary school? In what ways is this the beginning of the end of his childhood? Do you think major changes—like a change in school, or job, or residence—tend to occur in sync with the beginnings and ends of major periods in your own life story? Why or why not?

18. Book 3 covers a lot of similar material to that of the other books: Karl Ove's relationship with his father, romantic encounters with the opposite sex, his experiences with his friend Geir and his brother Ygnve. How are these themes different, given that Book 3 is about Karl Ove's childhood? Did you find Karl Ove's story more interesting as a child or as an adult? Did you find that Knausgaard's method of storytelling was different in this book? Did he use different words? Different structures? A different perspective?

19. At the end of Book 3, what parts of Karl Ove's life remain to be told? What particular struggles do you think he has yet to face? At this point, what part of Karl Ove's life has been the most difficult? The happiest? The most meaningful?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karl Ove Knausgaard was born in Oslo in 1968. His first novel, *Out of the World*, was published in 1998 and won the Norwegian Critics' Prize for Literature—the first time a debut had won this award. His second novel, *A Time for Everything*, came out six years later, won multiple prestigious prizes, and was named one of the Twenty-five Best Books of the Last Twenty-five Years by Norway's major newspaper; it was his first book to be translated into English (“Strange and marvelous,” said *The New York Review of Books*). With the publication of the first volume of *My Struggle* in 2009, he became a household name in Norway. He lives in rural Sweden with his wife and their three children.

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