Discussion Questions

*My Absolute Darling* by Gabriel Tallent

Source: Madison Public Library staff

1. The central character of this book is 14-year-old Turtle Alveston, who has had a difficult upbringing, to put it mildly. Why is Turtle the way she is? How has she learned to deal with her circumstances? Did you find her to be a likeable character? Why or why not?

2. What is the significance of Turtle’s name? Are there other names or nicknames in the book that have special meanings?

3. Explore Turtle’s relationship with her father. What drives Martin Alveston? Does he have any redeeming qualities?

4. Though the subject matter in this book is dark, are there spots of light in the book? What are they, and how do they change the narrative?

5. How would you describe Turtle’s relationship with Cayenne? How is Cayenne’s entrance into Turtle’s life a turning point for her?

6. How does the Northern California setting in this book contribute to the story? Would a different environment have changed the story? How do you see the nature theme throughout the book, and what is its significance?

7. Talk about the writing style. Did you think the narration style worked well? How else could the story have been told? How effective is the author’s use of dialogue and description?

8. A reviewer for *The New York Times* says that “This is a book profoundly about other books, fed by the classics like tributaries.” What other books does *My Absolute Darling* remind you of? Can you see the influence of other writers in Tallent’s prose? Which ones, and where?

9. Though most reviews of this book are overwhelmingly positive, some reviewers have taken issue with the book’s graphic portrayals of abuse. Do you think the explicit scenes are necessary to the story, or are they excessive? Other reviewers have taken issue with Tallent, a man, writing a female’s story of sexual abuse. Do you think Tallent does a good job of writing a female coming of age story, or do you think this isn’t his story to tell?