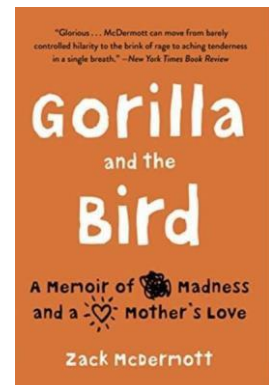


## Discussion Guide

### *Gorilla and the Bird: A Memoir of Madness and a Mother's Love* By Zack McDermott

1. Do you know anyone who has bipolar disorder? How did you recognize the disorder or learn of it? Did their mental illness affect you and if so, how?
2. How did the intertwining of the reality and the myth of Uncle Edward inform Zack's illness and recovery?
3. What are the ways you saw the Bird advocate for her son's mental health? What role does the Bird play in Gorilla's recovery?
4. In the book, Zack paints a vivid portrait of his childhood in Wichita, KS, and his life in New York City as a public defender. How do these places inform and shape Zack? In what ways are these two cities similar? And in what important ways do they differ?
5. What would you say is Zack's turning point in his journey to recovery?
6. When Zack is hospitalized in Osawatomie State Hospital, he meets an accused murderer. He observes, "People always ask public defenders how we can defend people we know are guilty. One of the many reasons for me is that I don't believe too strongly in the existence of choice. Nobody wants to be f'd-up." How does his statement about choice relate to his mental illness? To mental illness in general?
7. Later, Zack is confiding to his mother about his bipolar disorder and says, "Of course intellectually I could latch on to the idea that I didn't choose to be mentally ill. I could parrot my own b-s about how no one chooses to be sick and about how the mentally ill are no different from diabetics or cancer patients, but did I really believe me?" Are there ways people like you and me can help to reduce or remove the stigma a mental illness carries in the United States?
8. What did you learn, if anything, from Zack's first-hand account about bipolar disorder that was new to you?
9. After Zack's last experience of mania, he observes, "I knew we'd never have kids – not with the radioactive nature of my genetic material; I'd never risk passing this on." [Genetics Home Reference](#) states, "Studies suggest that nongenetic (environmental) factors also contribute to a person's risk of developing bipolar disorder. Stressful events in a person's life, such as a death in the family, can trigger disease symptoms. Substance abuse and traumatic head injuries have also been associated with bipolar disorder. It seems likely that environmental conditions interact with genetic factors to determine the overall risk of developing this disease." What things in Zack's biology or environment may have triggered his bipolar disorder?
10. How might you help someone you suspect of having bipolar disorder?



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