

# Bonnie Jo Campbell Biography

Source: [www.litlovers.com](http://www.litlovers.com)



Bonnie Jo Campbell is an American novelist and short story writer.

Campbell received a B.A. in philosophy from the University of Chicago in 1984. From Western Michigan University, she received an MA in mathematics in 1995 and an MFA in creative writing in 1998. She has traveled with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus, and has organized adventure bicycle tours in Eastern Europe and Russia.

She was a finalist for the 2009 National Book Award in fiction for her short-story collection *American Salvage*, which the *Kansas City Star* also named a Top Six Book of 2009. *American Salvage*, was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. She has won a Pushcart Prize for her story “The Smallest Man in the World,” the 1998 Associated Writing Programs Award for short fiction (for *Women & Other Animals*), and the 2009 Eudora Welty Prize from *Southern Review* for “The Inventor, 1972.”

Her stories and essays have also appeared in *Ontario Review*, *Story*, *Kenyon Review*, *Witness*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Utne Reader*. In 1999, her story “Shifting Gears” was the official story of the Detroit Automobile Dealers’ Association Show.

Campbell lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan, with her husband, Christopher Magson and teaches fiction at Pacific University in Forest Grove, Oregon, in the low-residency MFA program. (From Wikipedia.)

# Book Summary

Source: [www.urbanbooks.net](http://www.urbanbooks.net)

Bonnie Jo Campbell has created an unforgettable heroine in sixteen-year-old Margo Crane, a beauty whose unflinching gaze and uncanny ability with a rifle have not made her life any easier.

After the violent death of her father, in which she is complicit, Margo takes to the Stark River in her boat, with only a few supplies and a biography of Annie Oakley, in search of her vanished mother. But the river, Margo’s childhood paradise, is a dangerous place for a young woman traveling alone, and she must be strong to survive, using her knowledge of the natural world and her ability to look unsparingly into the hearts of those around her.

Her river odyssey through rural Michigan becomes a defining journey, one that leads her beyond self-preservation and to the decision of what price she is willing to pay for her choices. (From the publisher.)

## Discussion Questions

Source: [www.LitLovers.com](http://www.LitLovers.com)

1. How would you describe Margo Crane—what inner qualities enable her to leave home at 16 and survive a journey on the river? As a reader, do you find yourself connecting with her? Or is she too stoic and taciturn to fully engage your emotions?
2. In what way has her mother’s abandonment of her shaped Margo’s character?
3. Margo’s initial reaction to her rape is to wonder whether somehow she was at fault. Do you think her response is typical of rape victims? Had you been a friend or family member, what would you tell her?
4. To what extent can Margo be held responsible for her father’s death?
5. How is this a coming of age story? What, by the end, has Margo learned during the course of her adventures? Does she learn anything? Has she grown or matured?

6. What do you make of Margo's sexual experiences? Is she overly compliant? Is her moral compass askew—in other words, is she morally compromised? Or is Margo a sturdy pragmatist, doing what she needs to survive? Or neither? What does the book suggest about moral clarity? Is there a different code of behavior in the wild than in society?

7. What about the men? Does Brian, for instance, have genuine concern for Margo's welfare, or is he merely an opportunist, taking whatever pleasure presents itself? How does Brian leave Margo exposed to the lusts of other men? What do you think of her relationship with Smoke?

8. Has Campbell presented us with stereotypes of men, or has she created them as distinct individuals revealing a wide variety of behavior? What do you think?

9. In her interaction with Michael, Margo says she was "feeling the same urgency she felt when she had a buck in her sights." Why does Campbell make this connection between sex and violence—what could she be suggesting about how the two human activities are related?

10. Talk about the book's title. What is the thematic significance of the river? What other works can you think of that involve a boat or ship and a body of water—ocean or river? What stands behind the metaphor?

11. Do you know the story of Annie Oakley? Why does Margo model herself after Oakley—what is the link between her and Oakley?

12. Margo is on the archetypal quest of a young hero (in this case, heroine). She is in search of her mother. What does the mother represent (young males typically search for fathers)? What do you think of Margo's mother once she finds her? For Margo, was the finding worth the journey?

13. What's to become of Margo? What do you predict for her? What do you wish for her?



# Book Club in a Bag

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## *Once Upon a River* by Bonnie Jo Campbell

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