

Nomadland

Jessica Bruder

Reading Group Guide

Discussion Questions

1. The people portrayed in *Nomadland* take to life on the road for various reasons, from economic necessity to wanderlust, and there are a lot of them—around 300,000. What do you think drives these people, many of them nearing or beyond traditional retirement age, to go off the grid?
2. Do you think *Nomadland* fairly characterizes the United States in the wake of the Great Recession of 2008? Are the modern nomads really an “indicator species,” as Jessica Bruder writes, signaling bigger changes ahead? In other words, is the shift to a nomadic lifestyle a temporary adjustment, or is it likely to grow in the coming years?
3. How do you feel about the corporate response to these modern nomads of creating low-paying seasonal jobs specifically designed for RVers and vandwellers? Do you think these corporations are exploiting a source of cheap labor, or providing valuable opportunities for employment?
4. A common theme of Bruder’s reporting is the fact that communities spring up everywhere among the new nomads: mutual support groups, online forums, newsletters, and clubs. What does this say about the traveling life? And about human needs in general?

5. How would you feel if your own community became a waypoint for nomads like the people described in this book? Would you be able to accept them staying at the margins of your town, setting up in the parking lots of big box retailers? Why or why not?
6. Many of the nomads are older, nearing or past the age that used to signify retirement. Is their lifestyle—living “houseless”; working low-paying, seasonal jobs—an indictment of the United States’s social safety net, and if so, how? Or is it an adaptive lifestyle that eschews the formal restrictions of society? Discuss your reasoning.
7. Bruder wonders at one point why the modern RV nomads are “so white,” noting a “micro-minority” of people of color among the traveling population (pp. 179–80). Do you believe, as she proposes, that this is due to possible racism within the community, or racism outside the community that could lead to police harassment and profiling on the road? Or is it due to something else entirely?
8. As part of her reporting, Bruder does short-term work at a beet-processing plant and in a warehouse with Amazon’s CamperForce program, experiencing for herself the labor conditions nomads and other short-term workers face every day. What do you make of her experience? Do you think she captured the reality of this world?
9. “*What parts of this life are you willing to give up, so you can keep on living?*” and “*When do impossible choices start to tear people—a society—apart?*” (p. 247) asks Bruder in her final chapter, arguing that the growth of the nomad population reflects some Americans choosing a new answer to these questions when faced with difficult

financial challenges. Do you think the sacrifices they make by taking to the road are worth it? Why or why not?