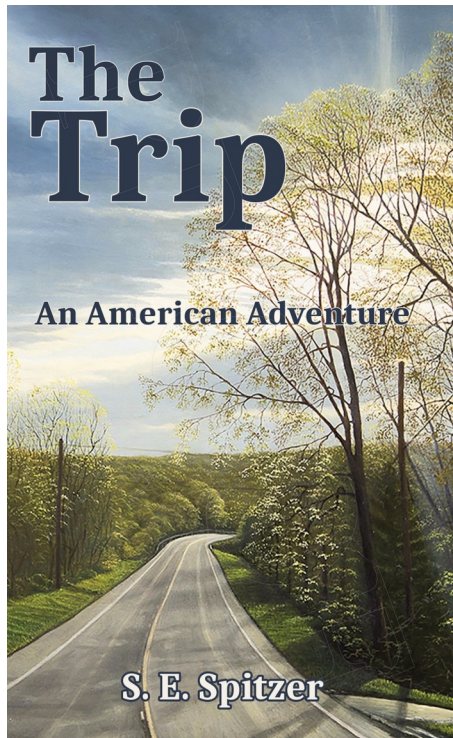


THE TRIP

An American Adventure | S. E. Spitzer

1. READING & DISCUSSION GUIDE

Questions for close reading, interpretation, and classroom or book-group conversation.



A MEMOIR IN TWO TIMES

A sixteen-year-old travels across America in 1971 on a 1950 Harley-Davidson. Decades later, the narrator asks what that journey taught him about work, trust, danger, family, and independence.

This guide follows the story from the brothers' move to California to the motorcycle's later life as a family heirloom.

SEVEN READING SESSIONS

Reading checks • Group discussion

Text-evidence prompts • Whole-book questions

Recommended for: upper-secondary and adult readers; educator discretion advised for mature situations and language.

2026 edition • ISBN 979-8-953391-00-9

Free for noncommercial classroom and reading-group use.

2. How to use this guide

Read the book in seven sessions, or adapt the sequence to your class. Each session contains a short orientation, three reading checks, three discussion questions, and a closing evidence prompt. The guide does not supply a single “correct” interpretation of the narrator’s choices.

Read in two time frames

- 1971: What does the teenager know in the moment, and what options seem available to him?
- Retrospective telling: What does the older narrator understand, question, or remember uncertainly?
- Now: What can we compare thoughtfully without assuming that one person’s memory represents everyone’s experience?

A shared way to support an interpretation

Ask readers to identify (1) the specific action or description; (2) the conclusion they draw; and (3) another plausible reading. Encourage citation by chapter title and passage rather than by page number alone, since digital editions reflow.

SOURCE NOTE Chapter openings and page numbers below refer to the 2026 printed edition of *The Trip*. The account is a first-person memoir; historical claims and recollections are presented as the narrator describes them. They are not intended as historical material for study but are situational in nature.

Discussion setting

The memoir contains references to alcohol, sexualized nightlife, conflict, dangerous travel, and language shaped by its period. Invite careful analysis of these scenes without requiring students to disclose personal experiences. A “pass” option for personal-response questions is appropriate.

Central questions

What counts as being prepared? What is the difference between freedom and responsibility? What makes help from a stranger possible? How do an object and a journey carry family history?

3. Seven sessions / where to begin

#	Focus and chapter titles	Opening printed pages
01	A new home, a working education The West was the Best; The World of Eddie Spaghetti; We Lost Steven	1 / 10 / 23
02	The decision and the first repairs And So I Go; The Fix is in	32 / 42
03	Solitude, weather, and belonging An Oily Mess; Pioneers and Frontiers	61 / 74
04	Breakdown and unexpected allies The Heart and The Sickle; Mrs. Robinson Remade	80 / 98
05	Borders, home, and the promise Queen Elizabeth Meets the Biker; They Turned Off Niagara Falls?	104 / 114
06	Cars, work, and making a living A Wreck Looking for a Place to Happen; Munchie Burgers	120 / 124
07	The return journey and the old machine Go East, Young Man; The Caboose	132 / 158

EDITION NOTE The chapter labels are reproduced as printed, including the transition from Chapter Twelve to Chapter Fourteen. The guide does not renumber the source.

Quick preparation for a discussion leader

Choose a “reading check” question to establish what happened, then two interpretive questions. Ask everyone to bring one passage showing the narrator acting, and one passage showing him reflecting later. Reserve the final five minutes for a short written response.

4. A new home, a working education

“The West was the Best” (p. 1) • “The World of Eddie Spaghetti” (p. 10) • “We Lost Steven” (p. 23)

How does independence begin before the motorcycle trip?

Eric and the narrator arrive in California in 1969 to live with their father. Sparse furnishings, flea-market trading, repairs, and time spent on their own shape their idea of competence. Earlier family memories explain the Harley’s meaning. The chapter about the DMV makes identity unexpectedly literal.

Check the reading

1. Describe the brothers’ first home in Castro Valley. What did they have, and what were they expected to manage themselves?
2. How do flea markets, pawn-shop work, and mechanical repairs become part of the narrator’s informal education?
3. What happens to the name “Steven” at the California DMV, and why does the narrator accept “Edward”?

Discuss together

1. Where does the narrative draw the line between opportunity to learn and too much responsibility for children?
2. What does the old Harley represent to the father before it becomes the son’s everyday transportation?
3. How do the school’s unusual rules and the narrator’s new name affect his sense of who he can be?

FOLLOW A THREAD Find one scene of necessity and one scene of choice. Does the narrator describe both as forms of freedom?

5. The decision and the first repairs

“And So I Go” (p. 32) • “The Fix is in” (p. 42)

What does a sixteen-year-old need to know before setting out?

A visit east turns into a cross-country motorcycle plan. The father gives the narrator \$85, a chain breaker, a master link, and an expectation: bring the motorcycle back. Almost immediately, the rider must revise his Hollywood-inspired packing and diagnose mechanical trouble on the highway.

Check the reading

1. Why does the father suggest riding instead of flying, and what condition does he attach to the offer?
2. What does the narrator carry when he leaves? Which choice is corrected before he even reaches the road?
3. Near Tracy, how does he investigate a failure that leaves the engine running but the motorcycle unable to move?

Discuss together

1. Do the father’s trust and his limited preparations contradict each other? What evidence supports your view?
2. How do the roadside repairs change the meaning of “adventure” from an image in a film to practical work?
3. Why does the narrator pay so much attention to sound, smell, speed, and the feel of the machine?

FOLLOW A THREAD Identify a moment when a small act of judgment prevents a larger problem, and a moment when the rider accepts a risk.

6. Solitude, weather, and belonging

“An Oily Mess” (p. 61) • “Pioneers and Frontiers” (p. 74)

How does a familiar machine change the way a traveler sees a place?

On Highway 50 and then farther east, the motorcycle’s pace and its oil and electrical needs shape the journey. In Cheyenne, the narrator stumbles into Frontier Days, meets people who take an interest in him, and compares his family’s move west with earlier migration stories.

Check the reading

1. Why do fuel, oil, and wiring trouble influence when and where he stops?
2. How does the narrator describe the difference between riding a slow 45 and traveling in an enclosed car?
3. What does he misunderstand at first about the gathering in Cheyenne, and what does he learn from conversations there?

Discuss together

1. Does traveling alone make him more independent, more dependent on strangers, or both?
2. How does the Cheyenne celebration complicate the contrast he draws between New York and California?
3. Where does the older narrator openly admit uncertainty about time or memory? How should that shape our reading?

FOLLOW A THREAD Compare one passage about solitary riding with one passage about a public gathering. What shifts in his sense of belonging?

7. Breakdown and unexpected allies

“The Heart and The Sickle” (p. 80) • “Mrs. Robinson Remade” (p. 98)

When the plan breaks down, who makes the journey possible?

West of Davenport, a seized engine threatens to end the trip. The owner of a Gulf station offers space and help; Manny, president of a local motorcycle club, helps find parts. In Michigan, strangers direct the exhausted rider to a woman who offers a place to sleep, breakfast, and conversation.

Check the reading

1. What failure stops the motorcycle near Davenport? What temporary transmission compromise lets the narrator continue?
2. Which actions by the station owner and Manny are practical help, and which show personal trust?
3. How does the narrator come to spend the night at an unknown woman’s home in Michigan? What does he remember about their conversation?

Discuss together

1. How do the narrator’s expectations about biker clubs compare with his experience with Manny?
2. What is the difference between judging a stranger by appearance and by their actions? Where does the book test that difference?
3. How do these episodes complicate an individualistic idea of success as doing everything oneself?

FOLLOW A THREAD Place two descriptions of strangers side by side: one first impression and one later judgment. What changed?

8. Borders, home, and the promise

“Queen Elizabeth Meets the Biker” (p. 104) • “They Turned Off Niagara Falls?” (p. 114)

Can a journey succeed if the original plan cannot be completed?

A Michigan trooper questions the young rider and requires a helmet. The rider chooses a Canadian route, worries about money and oil, and eventually reaches family in Niagara Falls. A careful inspection there shows how much the Harley has suffered; the promise to return it west now seems difficult to fulfill.

Check the reading

1. What questions does the Michigan trooper ask, and how does the narrator understand them?
2. Why is the Canadian border crossing difficult? What happens to the small amount of money and oil he has left?
3. What does the Niagara Falls inspection reveal about the Harley, and what plan does the narrator finally make?

Discuss together

1. Is the border incident a story about rules, storytelling, confidence, luck, or some combination?
2. The narrator recalls Niagara Falls itself being temporarily diverted. Why might he connect that event to his motorcycle repairs?
3. What counts as keeping a promise when the facts change? How might father and son answer differently?

FOLLOW A THREAD Choose a passage showing confidence and another showing limits. Explain why both belong in a coming-of-age story.

9. Cars, work, and making a living

“A Wreck Looking for a Place to Happen” (p. 120) • “Munchie Burgers” (p. 124)

What does the narrator do after the trip changes his life?

Back in California, the narrator’s relationship with school and transportation changes. An improvised motorcycle project gives way to an aging MG. The family tries earning a living in different ways before turning flea-market experience and musical-instrument repairs into a store. Eric’s and his father’s work remain central.

Check the reading

1. Why does returning to a conventional school routine feel difficult after the ride?
2. How does the narrator compare an unreliable old car with the Harley, and what can it still make possible?
3. What do the family learn about wholesale prices when they visit B & J, and how does that change their business thinking?

Discuss together

1. How does the memoir define education outside a classroom? Where are its limits?
2. Which habits learned from repairing and trading objects carry over into starting a business?
3. What costs—financial and otherwise—fall on the family while they try to make the store work?

FOLLOW A THREAD Trace one skill or habit from the early flea-market scenes into the music-store chapter. Is it the same skill in a new setting?

10. The return journey and the old machine

“Go East, Young Man” (p. 132) • “The Caboose” (p. 158)

How can a motorcycle become more than transportation?

In 1972, the narrator and Eric return east in the MGA to retrieve the Harley. Repairs, help from family, and a homemade towing arrangement become another test of ingenuity. Years later, the motorcycle reappears in the father’s life and then in the narrator’s barn, where it holds a different meaning.

Check the reading

1. What is the purpose of the 1972 trip, and how is it different from the motorcycle ride a year earlier?
2. How do the narrator and his grandfather work through the problem of getting the Harley back west?
3. What details of wear on the motorcycle matter to the narrator in “The Caboose”?

Discuss together

1. How has the narrator’s understanding of independence changed between the two cross-country trips?
2. Why does the final encounter with the Harley carry emotional weight even though the bike is no longer useful as ordinary transport?
3. What do the father, grandfather, brothers, and narrator each contribute to the motorcycle’s history?

FOLLOW A THREAD Return to the departure scene with the \$85 and compare it with the final barn scene. What has stayed the same, and what has changed?

11. Whole-book discussion

These questions work for a final seminar, a small reading group, or a short oral presentation. Ask participants to support each interpretation with at least two scenes from different parts of the book.

01 FREEDOM & OBLIGATION

The trip starts as an act of independence but includes a promise to a parent, strict limits imposed by a machine, and dependence on strangers. Which is the more accurate description of the journey: freedom, responsibility, or negotiation between the two?

02 MECHANICAL KNOWLEDGE

When does knowing how a motorcycle works give the teenager real power? When does that knowledge fail to be enough?

03 WORK & VALUE

Consider flea-market trading, the music store, and the people who offer food or spare parts. How does the book distinguish price from value?

04 PEOPLE & FIRST IMPRESSIONS

How are appearances misleading in the stories of Manny, the Michigan host, or people met at roadside stops? Does the narrator ever stereotype people himself?

05 PLACE & BELONGING

Compare Castro Valley, Cheyenne, Davenport, and Niagara Falls. Which observations are of streets and objects, and which are judgments about people?

06 MEMORY & STORYTELLING

The narrator sometimes admits he cannot recall dates, words, or the exact sequence of events. Why might those admissions increase—or decrease—your trust in the story?

07 RISK ACROSS GENERATIONS

How might a reader in 1971 and a reader today assess the father's decision to let a sixteen-year-old make the ride? What would each need to know?

08 THE ENDING

What changes when the motorcycle stops being a way to travel and becomes a repository of family memory?

12. From discussion to evidence

Choose one of these prompts for a one- to two-page response or a five-minute group presentation. The purpose is interpretation supported by specific moments in the memoir, not a generic report on the 1970s.

1 THE \$85 TEST

Was the father's estimate of what his son needed for the ride a financial calculation, a lesson, or both? Use the departure scene and two later decisions involving money or repairs.

2 A CHAIN OF HELP

Follow three people who make the trip possible. Compare what each person offers, what they ask in return, and how the narrator remembers them.

3 TWO JOURNEYS

Compare the 1971 motorcycle ride with the 1972 MGA trip. Consider purpose, companions, repairs, confidence, and destination.

4 THE MOTION OF MEMORY

Examine a moment in which a smell, machine sound, place, or song carries the narrator into another time. Explain what the shift adds to the story.

5 THE BIKE AS CHARACTER

The old Harley is repeatedly described in human terms. Explain how its significance changes from the opening chapters to "The Caboose."

A useful response has four parts

1. A claim that can be debated, not merely a summary of the plot.
2. Two or more specific passages or scenes from different parts of the memoir.
3. An explanation of how those details support the claim, including a possible complication.
4. A conclusion that returns to the larger question rather than simply repeating events.

READING DISTINCTION A memoir is valuable as testimony to one person's experience. When discussing a broad statement about how life "was" in 1971, distinguish the narrator's remembered perspective from a fact established by independent historical evidence.

13. A ready-to-use 50-minute conversation

5 MIN Opening: each reader names an object, person, or place that stayed with them, without interpretation.

8 MIN Establish the scene: review one reading-check question together. Fix only what the text can resolve.

17 MIN Discuss a tension: independence versus help, trust versus risk, or father's rules versus the teenager's choices.

12 MIN Close-read: place two passages from different chapters in conversation. What does the later scene change?

8 MIN Exit reflection: one new idea, one unresolved question, and the passage that led to it.

Facilitation notes

- Ask “Which sentence or action gives you that impression?” before accepting a broad claim about a character.
- Keep the adolescent's options separate from the older narrator's later interpretation.
- Allow room for conflicting readings of the father's trust, the risk of solo travel, and the nature of strangers' help.
- In historically charged passages, ask what the narrator observed, what he inferred, and what would require outside verification.

Resource information

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