

“The Big Door Prize” by M.O. Walsh

About the Book

From Penguin Random House

The New York Times bestselling author of “My Sunshine Away” returns with another instant Southern classic: a gripping and heartfelt novel about a mysterious machine that upends a small Louisiana town, asking us all to wonder if who we truly are is who we truly could be.

What would you do if you knew your life’s potential? That’s the question facing the residents of Deerfield, Louisiana, when the DNAMIX machine appears in their local grocery store. It’s nothing to look at, really—it resembles a plain photo booth. But its promise is amazing: With just a quick swab of your cheek and two dollars, the device claims to use the science of DNA to tell you your life’s potential. With enough credibility to make the townspeople curious, soon the former teachers, nurses, and shopkeepers of Deerfield are abruptly changing course to pursue their destinies as magicians, cowboys, and athletes—including the novel’s main characters, Douglas Hubbard and his wife, Cherilyn, who both believed they were perfectly happy until they realized they could dream for more...

Written with linguistic grace and a sense of wonder, “The Big Door Prize” sparkles with keen observations about what it might mean to stay true to oneself while honoring the bonds of marriage, friendship, and community, and how the glimmer of possibility can pull these bonds apart, bring them back together, and make second chances possible, even under the strangest of circumstances.

About the Author

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M.O. Walsh’s writing has appeared in The New York Times, The Guardian, Oxford American, The Southern Review, and Best New American Voices, among others. His novel “My Sunshine Away” was a New York Times bestseller and winner of the Pat Conroy Southern Book Prize. He is a graduate of the MFA program at the University of Mississippi and currently directs the Creative Writing Workshop at the University of New Orleans.

Discussion Questions

From Putnam, Book Ends edition of “The Big Door Prize”

1. “The Big Door Prize” is a heartfelt novel about one of the most fundamental questions we ask ourselves: Who am I truly meant to be? Have you ever asked yourself this? Was there ever a time in your life when you felt yourself at a similar crossroads?
2. Douglas and Cherilyn have settled into their lives and marriage and seem quite happy. Why do you think they reacted to their Potential Life Stations as they did?
3. Jacob struggles with loneliness after the loss of his twin brother, Toby, and finds a connection with Trina. What do you think draws him to Trina? How does their relationship impact Jacob’s memory of Toby and his own sense of self?
4. “The Big Door Prize” features several of the townspeople of Deerfield. How did this style of narration impact your reading experience? Did it allow you to connect to some characters more than others? If so, which characters did you relate to the most, and why?
5. Father Pete is often presented as a voice of reason in the novel. Talk a bit about his relationships with the other characters, in particular Douglas and Trina. How does his own background impact his place in the Deerfield community?
6. Why do you think the townspeople were so willing to believe their results from the DNAMIX machine? Would you be willing to believe a readout that said you had already reached your potential, as Douglas did? Do you think people need to believe there is more out there for them?
7. The source of Trina’s hurt and anger is much deeper than it first appears, and she spends much of the novel processing her trauma in a very focused way. Were you surprised by her plan for revenge, or was it understandable? What did you think about her logic for who should be held responsible?
8. Looking at the relationship between Douglas and Cherilyn, what does the novel suggest may be the qualities of a strong marriage or relationship? What types of thoughts or actions can pull it apart? Do you agree?
9. If you were ever given the chance to discover your life’s potential, would you want to know? What do you think your results would be?
10. While reading, where did you think the machine came from? Were you surprised by its origins?
11. What do you think is next for these characters? For Douglas and Cherilyn? Jacob and his father? Father Pete and Trina?