



Discussion Questions

The Tough Paradise theme has been developed with sets of specific discussion questions for each of the available reading selections. These questions have been provided to encourage a deeper discussion among participants and to provide general guidance and direction. Facilitators and participants are encouraged to research, prepare, and engage with additional questions for their specific needs.

Balsamroot: A Memoir

1. Blew shares with us a story, “Grandsir,” that her aunt wrote (64-66). What lessons on aging are in this story?
2. “Auntie and I are locked in mortal combat for our lives.” (76). Discuss. What are the terms of the conflict? How is it eventually resolved?
3. How revealing is the author’s observation that her aunt, even in her dementia “longs for just what I secretly long for: to love and be loved”? (73)
4. At least twice (4, 61) we hear the unwritten code: “never speak aloud of what you feel deeply.” This code relates to a family trait of “distance” (136) – a lack of physical touching or display of affection. How do these traits relate to Imogene’s life story and to Blew’s internal struggles? Does the experience of aging (or confronting the problems of aging) in any way help Blew in her relationship with Elizabeth?
5. What function do Imogene’s diaries serve in the novel for the reader? For the narrator?
6. Imogene kept herself busy, always the aunt on the fringes of family. On page 192, Blew writes of Imogene’s “fear of being alone—the fear of annihilation” in connection with the way she lived her life. Comment on this idea.
7. On page 203, Blew writes “Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned—for years I would have disagreed with Yets, believed that the only heart worth having was the heart that came as a gift.” How does this sentiment tie into Imogene’s life? Into Blew’s life?
8. Blew puts together fragments from the diaries to construct the story of Imogene and Lud. What does that narrative tell us about Imogene’s life which Blew had not known? Does this knowledge bring wisdom to Blew?

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9. How does Pete Daniels fit into this narrative?
10. In what way is the lowering of the Snake River in 1992 relevant to the narrative Blew is shaping for us?
11. In what ways is the horseback ride of the final chapter a fitting conclusion?

Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter

1. What do you make of the subtitle “The Odyssey of a Native Daughter?” What are the features of Hale’s odyssey?
2. Discuss the notion of home in Bloodlines.
3. Do you find the conclusion to this memoir to be satisfying? And if not, what do you make of it?
4. Hale’s writing has been described as using nonlinear treatment of time. For example, she writes about her terrible childhood with her alcoholic father and unfair, bitter, and cynical mother, followed by affectionate memories of the reconciliation scene in the hospital at her mother’s deathbed in “Daughter of Winter.” She’s middle-aged then but 19 in the next essay, then a good deal older thereafter. Do you read this as exemplifying awkward composition, or as representing a different way of looking at life and the world?
5. Did the jump from childhood to post-college leave too much out of her memoir or was it okay since Hale states, “I’m in fact doing this [writing] for therapeutic, not artistic reasons” (5)? Or do you buy that premise at all? After all, by the time she wrote this book, she’d had two other books published, and her novel *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture* (1985) was highly regarded. How would this sometimes depressing book serve any therapeutic purpose?
6. Hale says she was “torn between writing a novel that was true to my own vision and one that presented a positive image of Indian people” (xxii). What, if anything, does a writer “owe” to his or her people, whether one perceives that as family, ethnic group, or nationality? Is it all too easy to answer “nothing—the writer owes it only to herself to write the truth as she sees it”? This does reach to the very real problem of audience. For whom, other than herself, is Janet Campbell Hale writing here? Do you suppose many Coeur d’Alene have read this book? Or have admired it? Some reviewers have described



Hale in *Bloodlines* as a “strong independent woman” who emerges successfully from her struggles with a dysfunctional family. Do you agree?

7. Do you think Hale’s suffering inflicted by her own family was more traumatic than the racism she faced from white/Anglo society? In *Bloodlines*, Hale does not represent a conventional mother-daughter relationship, yet there are some signs of the bond between the two. Discuss this.
8. Hale claims that when autobiography is used as “a basis for fiction,” as in her novel, *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*, “a rearrangement, a transformation must occur” (12) and in fiction “Real life comes into play only insofar as it can serve the purpose of art” (15). This might be worth reflecting upon in its own right, but what about the matter of “transformation” when it comes to autobiography or memoir? Do we as readers expect it—even demand it? And does it happen here? Do we tend to expect or even demand reconciliation at the end of such writings?
9. Do “all families have a scapegoat” as Hale declares on pp. 74-5, where she uses some form of that work no fewer than 8 times in 20 lines of text? Does your family have a “scapegoat”? Should it?

Buffalo Coat

1. Early in *Buffalo Coat*, in a section from Anna’s perspective, we read, “Doctor and other men with him were building civilization here, quickly and expertly, over the abyss; and on a night like this with blizzard and suicide in the air, she saw with quiet clarity how frail their building was” (21). How does Brink develop these ideas of “civilization” and an “abyss,” i.e. something “untamed” or “savage” (22) in the place and people of Opportunity (Moscow)? How does her handling of civilization and wilderness (or “untamed” spaces) differ or overlap with other narratives of Western expansion that you’ve read, and/or with your own thinking about, and experiences of, the West?
2. Considering this novel in relation to the theme of “Tough Paradise” is interesting since one of Moscow’s original names was “Paradise Valley.” Brink calls the town “Opportunity,” and multiple characters comment on the name being part of what draws them here. How does Brink’s novel develop or complicate ideas about the West as a place that offers a different kind of opportunity than the rest of the country or world at the time? Do you see “opportunity” being synonymous with, and/or in tension with, the

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concept of “paradise” in the novel? Why might Brink have named the town “Opportunity” rather than “Paradise”?

3. Stories of the West have often centered on men, and while male characters are indeed central to *Buffalo Coat*, women, particularly Jenny and Anna, are also some of the strongest, most independent-thinking, and perceptive characters. In one central scene, Jenny decides to read her essay that begins, “We are here to carry out your visions of the future. The women are here, too, standing shoulder to shoulder with the men. . .” (151)—expressing her “suffragist” ideas in defiance of Doctor Hawkins’ instructions and his oft-stated views on women’s foolishness. How do you see Brink commenting on gender expectations in the late 1800s, and how do these expectations and roles interact with the themes of toughness, paradise, opportunity, and civilization that are at the heart of this story?
4. The mountain repeatedly appears as something that the characters think about, or go to, or are aware of as a presence in relation to Opportunity and in contrast to other landscapes they’ve known. In her *Tough Paradise* theme essay, Susan Swetnam writes about the effects of place on people, and particularly the effects of Western landscapes: “What, for example, were the effects of living in a landscape marked by long vistas and large sweeps of unpopulated country?” In the case of *Buffalo Coat*, what is the effect of being within sight of the mountain most times? At one point, Doctor Allerton thinks, “one must live with mountains in order to understand them” (188). What do you see this meaning in the story?
5. How much people can connect—and the varied ways that they feel alone in their own minds and experiences—are recurring themes for the characters in *Buffalo Coat*. What passages or scenes about aloneness and/or connection most stood out to you? What do you see these saying about the ways that people have to be self-sufficient and/or can support one another? How does Brink’s evocation of these themes at the founding of Moscow (Opportunity) help you to think about community/connection and aloneness is our contemporary Idaho?
6. The book opens with Jenny Walden Walking away from Opportunity to San Francisco and encountering a snowstorm and Doctor Hawkins—i.e. with the image of a lone, independent girl with dreams, and the evocation of safety and community (in the form of the doctor). How do these and other threads from this opening scene play out in the book? And how does this opening scene form a meaningful bookend with the scene that ends the novel: Anna standing “for a moment with the smell of the late summer flowers in her nostrils” (421)? How do other aspects of the structure of this story, particularly the

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order of characters that we get to know and scenes that we see, affect your understanding of the novel's themes?

Heart of a Western Woman

1. Leslie Leek is an Idaho native, and so she may speak from the position of a "western woman." What are the qualities of a western woman and how do they differ from other geographical women?
2. *Spring Thaw* is a story concerning dreams and hopes, growing apart, and perhaps together again. In the end, when Jill goes to Carl (p. 15), she cannot clearly answer why she wishes to be close. What struggles has she faced in this story? Are they resolved in her mind?
3. In *The Tetons*, how does the protagonist, Claudette, see the mountains? What do they represent to her? In what ways might this story be an extension of the themes in *Spring Thaw*?
4. In *Widows*, the death of Marilyn's husband Sam is a catalyst for this analysis of the ways women (as shown in Cid, Crystal, Helen, and Marilyn) deal with loss and community. Comment on each.
5. *Long Ride On a Good Mare* is about leaving. Marna Sue prepares for her departure for some time (p. 33). Why did it take her so long? What will she do now?
6. *Molly's Nipple* is a story about independence and growth. Comment on these elements.
7. *The Naming* is a sort of mystical essay. What are the elements of mysticism here? What role does woman's intuition or "earth power" play in relation to medical science? What words does Chris chant? What do they mean?
8. The title story, *Heart of a Western Woman*, shows Carly as invigorated by the wilderness and by nature; yet Taylor, the man she has followed, seems closed up by it, driven mad even. On page 50, Leek writes, "Now, Carly was attracted to his talk. It was somehow a compliment to her so she fell in love with him." Discuss this idea.
9. Discuss Fern's "madness" in *A Poem For Fern*. What is it that drove her "mad"? Is she cured? Is she independent?



10. In *Cut Beads*, the characters are Native Americans. Does this story feel different from the others? How?
11. *Birch Creek* contains a character named Benny, a woman of old but indeterminate age who evinces certain qualities. What are some of these qualities? What role does she play in this story? What sort of place is Birch Creek?

Hole in the Sky

1. What do you think Kittredge means at the end of the opening chapter "Falling," when he says he wants to tell stories that are "useful"? (That is, he wants this book to be "useful.") Do you find his stories in this memoir to be "useful"? Or were they just useful to him, but not necessarily to us as readers?
2. It has been suggested that Kittredge and many other contemporary western writers, like Ivan Doig and Mary Clearman Blew, are attempting to create a "new mythology" for the West. An appropriate jingle might go something like this: Old West, New West, False West, True West. What are the myths of the Old West (often connected with Hollywood and the novels of writers like Louis L'Amour)? To what extent does Kittredge spell out the values of the New West in this memoir, either explicitly or implicitly?
3. "We want to own everything," Kittredge complains (66). Is property the problem? Are we due for a change in thinking about land ownership?
4. In the best memoirs, the writers take risks, particularly with how they present (or re-present) themselves. To what extent does Kittredge do that in *Hole in the Sky*? Does he alienate himself from you as a reader in the process? If so, where or how? Another way of looking at this might be to say, "I really dislike the way Kittredge did/said/wrote X."
5. Late in the memoir Kittredge reflects on what he calls his "breakdown" (178), but he doesn't elaborate all that much. What do you make of it? Can you detect the sources of it? What, presumably, is the cure for it?

Home Below Hell's Canyon

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1. What are some of the hardships the Jordan family had to endure? How successful were they in conquering these challenges?
2. Did Jordan consider her ranch a “paradise,” tough or otherwise? Why or why not? How would you characterize the ranch?
3. In an essay written for the theme, scholar Susan Swetnam writes: “...the narratives show just how intimately human perception of place is colored by the values and attitudes of the perceiver suggesting that, at least in part, we come to love places that we define as ours because they tell us things about ourselves that we want to believe.” Discuss what you believe the land meant to Grace Jordan in this context.
4. What themes recur throughout this book: practicality, being productive, frugality, self-reliance, focus on education?
5. What does the author have to say about the role of and importance of women in the canyon?
6. Discuss the different writing styles or tones in this book, from the concrete and journalistic to poetic in her descriptive language. (Example: opening lines of Ch. 2, and language describing riding out in winter, p. 197).
7. People in the canyon met the world with frankness and practicality. Do you think it was characteristic of those lean times? Of isolated life in the canyon?
8. Are there particular images, characters or events that impressed you that we haven't discussed?
9. Are there passages, facts or descriptions that you found especially compelling?

Honey in the Horn

1. What are the themes of *Honey in the Horn*?
2. Did this book change your vision/image of the American pioneer? How?
3. Would you agree that this book is a mixture of humor and tragedy? Why?
4. Though a novel, could it just as easily be called a history book?
5. What feeling(s) did you take away or lessons did you learn from reading *Honey in the Horn*?

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6. How would you rank H.L. David and *Honey in the Horn* with works of other Pulitzer prize winners of his time such as Hemingway, A.B. Guthrie, Wm. Faulkner, and Steinbeck, or even Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the book to which *Honey in the Horn* is most often compared?

Housekeeping

1. When this book was originally published in 1982, literature had historically been more likely to focus on male experience than on female experience. *Housekeeping* is a novel which really has no male characters. Does that make a difference? You might compare it to such novels of male experience as *The Red Badge of Courage* or *Moby Dick*.
2. Commentators frequently describe the male quest as a horizontal one: Odysseus wants to get home; the knights want to find the Holy Grail; homesteaders want to find land; 49ers want to find gold; Huck Finn and Deerslayer want to avoid civilization. Such horizontal quests involve traveling from one place to another. Recently, commentator Carol Christ has suggested that the female quest is vertical, involving not travel from one place to another, but diving deep into the self in order to understand the individual's relation to society. Does either of these quest patterns fit *Housekeeping*?
3. Much of the western experience involves striving to establish homes and put down roots—as Polly Bemis and Annie Pike Greenwood tried to do. Idaho was a tough paradise, promising great rewards but demanding great endurance, and there are ironies in Sylvie and Ruth's abandonment of the paradise which earlier Idahoans worked so hard to achieve. How is their rejection of housekeeping related to the earlier homesteading effort? Have times changed, or are these simply different personalities?
4. Robinson's style is lyrical and carefully crafted. At the end, for example, when Ruth has accepted transience, the prose becomes both mystical and mythic, stylistically separating itself from the mundane, earthbound, "realistic" world which Ruth has given up. What other aspects of style do you notice?
5. This novel is rich with Biblical imagery. Fire and flood are important; Cain and Abel are mentioned; Ruth's grandmother tries to determine "how nearly the state of grace resembled the state of Idaho." How do such images affect the novel?



6. What is the relationship between humor and seriousness in this novel?
7. A major theme of *Housekeeping* is the relationship between permanence and transience. Even things and people which seem to have passed away are not entirely gone. Just beneath the surface of Lake Fingerbone float the faces of the drowned. In the breezes of abandoned homesteads can be heard the voices of children. What does the novel suggest about the relationship between impermanence and renewal and resurrection?
8. Is this an “Idaho novel” at all? Is the Idaho setting (the state is mentioned by name only once in the novel) crucial or even important? What does the novel suggest about the relationship between place and character?

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Journal of a Trapper

1. Very early in his journal Russell calls the Caw or Kansas Indians “the most filthy indolent and degraded sett of human beings I ever saw.” This sentiment is *not* at all “politically correct” these days. Frequently in the book he refers to Indians as “savages.” What, if anything, saves this journal from censure for being racist? The other major tribes he encounters are the Snake (Shoshone), Blackfeet, and Crow. How do they come off in his account?
2. Also early in his journal, Russell gives us some observations on sites in present-day Idaho, namely Soda Springs and Fort Hall (vicinity of Pocatello). How important are such accounts, along with descriptions like that of Jackson’s Hole (18), to your enjoyment of the book? My point here is that Russell is *not*, generally, a particularly vivid writer, not famous for his imagery and all. Does the book acquire appeal because you’ve visited some of the sites?
3. Russell’s account of his first attempt to kill a buffalo is pretty humorous (5), but he redeems himself when he confronts a grizzly (6). Where else do we find evidence of Russell’s sense of humor? Is it a significant feature of the book? What about his feats of courage, as in the Indian attack (16-17)? What is the appeal of this book?
4. The great British poets Russell might have read (he seems to have had some poetic aspirations, and note his “literary moments” on pp. 43, 45-6) would have been Byron, Shelley, and Keats (all dead by 1824); Longfellow was the big name in American poetry, along with William Cullen Bryant. As a boy, Russell might have read Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” which was published when he was five years old; James Fenimore Cooper’s “The Deerslayer” appeared in 1841. Perhaps this accounts for certain Romantic (with a capital R) moments in the journal, like those on pp. 27, 58 and elsewhere. Do you think Romanticism is an important aspect of Russell’s character or personality, or not? Does he see himself as “different” from his more rough-hewn companions (63)?
5. It could be argued that Russell misses many good opportunities for developing episodes (note pp. 15, 28). What are his best, most fully developed episodes? Consider encounters with Blackfeet (pp. 52-54, 86-89),

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Crow who rob his party and leave them to the elements (pp. 70-76), he and White wounded in Blackfeet attack (pp. 101-108). Of course there are “domestic” moments (pp. 114-116). Where, if anywhere, do you find Russell thoughtful, perceptive, insightful about his experiences?

6. Osborne Russell was by no means a sophisticated writer or profound thinker, so why should we spend our good time reading his book? After all, there are fairly numerous journals of this sort by the likes of Warran Angus Ferris’s *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 1830-1835, and Andrew Garcia’s *Tough Trip Through Paradise*, 1878-1879; or there are such novels as Vardis Fisher’s *Mountain Man* and A. B. Guthrie, Jr.’s *The Big Sky*. Where do you think Russell is at his best as a writer? How does he do, for example, with characterization? Or is it fair to have any expectations along such lines?
7. After rereading his poem at the end of the book (153-54), discuss Russell’s view of nature.
8. There is an underlying culture of trappers or mountain men which is embodied in traits of independence, a code of honor, and a sort of brotherhood. Comment on this culture.
9. In other books (Frederick Manfred’s *Lord Grizzly* and Vardis Fisher’s *Mountain Man*, for instance), “mountain men” are idealized heroes in many ways. What are some traits and qualities of mountain men in this book?
10. Despite the thematic concerns, this journal is Russell’s declared effort to correct misinformation about the life and ways of trappers and the wilderness. Discuss this book as a record of the times and an attempt, as Russell notes, to correct the flights of fancy of other trapper journalists.
11. Russell allows the reader a glimpse into his life for a space of nine years while he was a “mountain man,” and we know only a little about his life before or after this time. Speculate on his reasons for coming to the West. Why does Russell decide to migrate to the Oregon territory and later the California gold mines? How might his journey represent a “spirit of the times”?

Letters of a Woman Homesteader

1. This book was not conceived as an autobiography—it began as letters to a friend. In book form, it constitutes an autobiography of a portion of the

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writer's life. Given these constraints, how would you describe Elinore Stewart's autobiographical mode? For example, what sorts of details of her life does she choose to emphasize? To omit or gloss over? Compare and contrast with the other works you have read in this series.

2. The journey motif shapes many of the chapters. Several types of travel are exemplified: escape to a better life, home-founding, exploration, and journeys within (one's inner life) through reading and contemplation (a quest for knowledge). Discuss the author's various journeys and how they add structure, interest, and mythic quality to her narrative. Compare/contrast with the other works you have read in this series.
3. The author tells stories that portray vividly a number of people whose friendship becomes a joy and support to her. Most important are her female friends, Mrs. Louderer and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. Describe their roles, as well as the role of Mrs. Coney, to whom Elinore wrote her letters. Then there are other women who play minor but important roles: Sedalia and Regalia, Cora Belle, Molly, the "second" Mormon wife, etc. What do they contribute to the narrative?
4. Although the focus seems to be on female characters, men play important roles too. How does the author present Zebulon Pike, Gavotte, and Clyde Stewart?
5. The author seeks to convince her readers that a woman can "better herself" and succeed as a homesteader. Is she convincing? Consider, too, the social/economic context within which she proposes (and demonstrates) that a woman can succeed as a homesteader.
6. This book is dated in the sense that it deals with a bygone era in our national past. What did you gain from reading this book? What relevance does it have for you?
7. If you could interview the author, what would you ask her?

Lives of the Saints in Southeast Idaho

1. What aspects of these life histories are specific to the LDS subculture and which are universal to all types of biographical writing?

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2. Do you feel some of the short anecdotal sections are taken out of context? Is that a problem with the thesis of the chapter? Do the short sections adequately represent the larger themes?
3. How would reading this book as a member of the LDS community be different than reading it as an agnostic or a member of a different faith?
4. How did you feel about the organization of the book? Did you feel that the chapters transitioned well?
5. How can reading about this type of writing affect the ways that we think about our own personal histories?
6. Do you already practice genealogy? If so, how can this book inform your own inquiries? If not, do you think it might encourage you to start?

Lochsa Road

1. As we are informed on p. 5, Kim was 38 and soon to be divorced from his wife of 18 years (their daughter was six). How does this information impact your reading of what follows? By the time you've read the last pages of the book do you think your attitude toward him has changed? Does he implicitly demand that you be a "sympathetic" reader?
2. Do you have a favorite among these 8 short essays, and if so, why do you prefer it? Based on that essay or others in Lochsa Road, are you inclined to try his earlier collection, Having Everything Right?
3. When Kim Stafford is writing at his best in these essays, what is he doing? That is, how does he sound to you as a reader? Is he being informative? Dramatic? Is he presenting a good story, or is he being "vividly descriptive"?
4. Or is he being in some way/s, perhaps not conventionally, "spiritual"? Where, for example?
5. These can be called "essays of place," and one might propose that they speak most convincingly to those readers who are familiar with some (ideally many) of the places Kim encounters. In effect, that is what readers bring to the text—Kamiah & the Heart of the Monster site, for instance, or certain locations in Wyoming like Powell, Jackson, or Thermopolis, or places in eastern Idaho like Pocatello. Where would you place yourself



in this respect? Does such a regional focus deprive these essays of what literary pros & scholars call “universality”?

6. Would you recommend this book to “just about anyone” or to a more select readership? Who might you include OR exclude (yes, including your spouse or significant other)?
7. This slim book opens with an essay focused on Heart of the Monster & ends with an essay on another Native American site, She Who Watches, on the Columbia. Other essays touch on Native American artifacts like the white stone knife (22) and on the Arapaho cemetery (48). What are we to make of all this?

Myths of the Idaho Indians

Questions for this title are forthcoming.

Passages West: Nineteen Stories of Youth and Identity

8. Nichols tells us in the preface that he wanted “to put good stories before readers.” How do you think these selections offer “a good read”?
9. Which of these stories made you feel the “shock of recognition” that Nichols felt when reading stories rooted in the land and the people of the West, especially of “formative experiences” of young people coming of age?
10. What are some of the questions about youth and identity at the heart of these stories?
11. Which examples of the tension between teenagers and adults stood out to you? Was it because those incidents were most relatable, or because they were more extreme?
12. Most of the books in this series, “Growing Older, Growing Wiser,” center around characters at more advanced stages of life. How does this collection about adolescents fit under the theme of “Growing Older, Growing Wiser”?
13. Why do you think death figures so prominently in these stories?
14. Talk about the need for these young characters to prove themselves, to be self-reliant and valiant. Is that true only of youth? Or does it stay with us; is it ageless and timeless? Is that need to be heroic, to somehow control events, the reason for the appeal of



stories about superheroes so evident in today's media and dating back to earliest literature?

Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place

1. In what ways are birds important to this narrative, e.g. in depicting the relationship between narrator and her mother and grandmother, relevance as chapter titles, symbolic roles, etc.?
2. Name several meanings or definitions of "refuge" contained in the narrative. Is there any conclusive definition? Does the author answer her basic question, "How do we find refuge in the midst of change?"
3. What/who are healed in the story, and how? How is healing linked to nature, to religion, to state of mind, to Native American culture, etc.?
4. Terry's mother dies after years of battling cancer. What does she learn from the experience? What does Terry learn? Is Terry's narrative sentimentalized? How is human death linked to death in nature, and Terry's mother's death to the flooding Salt Lake?
5. Would you call this book a feminist document? In what ways are Terry's mother and grandmother Mimi important in her development? What does she learn from them? In what ways does she differ from them?
6. What does Terry gain from her Mormon background? She says she is not an "orthodox" Mormon. What evidence of her unorthodoxy do you see in the book? In what larger sense is the book a description of religious or spiritual experience? What role is played by rituals? By Native American beliefs?
7. How do urban-perceived necessities clash with natural forces when the lake floods? How do people, government, and businesses respond? How does Terry respond to the flooding of her beloved bird refuge? How do the birds respond? What ironies lie in "radiation" and its role in the story? Does the final chapter, The Clan of One-Breasted Women, seem tacked on, or intrinsically linked to the book that precedes it?

Sheep May Safely Graze

Questions for this title are forthcoming.





Stories that Make the World

Questions for this title are forthcoming.

Stump Ranch Pioneer

1. Why does Davis try so hard to separate her family's migration from the stereotype assigned to "Okies"?
2. What skills and knowledge do the "dust bowlers" bring west that help with their ultimate success in a new environment?
3. Does the book seem to overly romanticize the pioneer experience? Why do you think Davis chose to include so few of the hardships the family faced after they left Colorado?
4. Davis was an educated woman and a published writer when she and her family migrated to Idaho. How did her background influence the family's success?
5. The success of these families is heavily reliant on collaboration – both within the family unit and between neighbors. Is that still as important in rural communities today?
6. Why was the daily mail so important to Davis and her experience in Idaho? Is that something we've lost?
7. Is it important for these types of narratives to be written in modern times? What can we share with future generations?

Sweet Promised Land

1. Why does Laxalt's family have a strong bond despite a family structure where the father was away from his wife and children a lot of the time?
2. Pride and ethnic identity are very important to Basque peoples. How did these elements shape Dominique Laxalt's life? What about your own ethnic identity? How does it shape you? How have you transmitted it to your family?

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3. Going back home is such a prominent part of this book. Have you ever gone back home or returned to a place you had been away from for a long time? Was your experience similar or dissimilar to Laxalt's? How so?
4. Language is important for immigrants to America. Have you ever been somewhere where you didn't know the language? How did you adapt?
5. What was retirement like for Dominique? Have you ever changed your lifestyle in such a way as to have to rethink your daily comings and goings? What was that like?
6. Laxalt wrote from a unique perspective on the important intersection between the man of the West and his environment. In a letter to his editor at Curtis Brown while working on this book (Jan. '56), he wrote, "My father's story is to me primarily one of country." Would you agree? Where do we find evidence in the book to support this?
7. His brother Paul said he believed Laxalt's "writing spoke not just to Basques but to all sons and daughters of immigrants, to those who love the American West, and to readers who enjoy simple but eloquent writing.
8. Why do you think sons and daughters of immigrants, regardless of nationality, can relate to this story?
9. How well do we come to know Dominique? Talk about his contrasts, from tenderness with newborn lambs (p. 4) to quick temper and eagerness to settle things with his rifle.
10. Where do you see examples of Basque pride?
11. Did his pride help ensnare Dominique into finally making the trip? (He always kept his appointments made for him by others.) P. 33-4 "The reservations have been made...the beginning of it was actually in his eyes."
12. Why do you think Laxalt included the story about the silver dollar to be delivered to someone in Pamplona?
13. What do you take from Dominique's habit of saving new things for later use?
14. In a letter to his editor, Robert Laxalt refers to "...the inherent but accepted cruelty of nature and men" (Jan. '56 letter to his editor at Curtis Brown).
15. Where do we see this attitude toward nature expressed in this book?



Thousand Pieces of Gold

1. RuthAnne Lum McCunn has said that she wants to help readers understand what it is like to be trapped between two cultures. How does this book do that?
2. Why do you think McCunn chose to write a fictionalized account (novel) about a real-world person rather than a more straightforward biography or nonfiction book? What is added and what is taken away from Polly's story as a result?
3. As Polly grows into her new culture in Idaho, what conflicts remain for her?
4. Does Polly ever escape from being trapped between two cultures into a fulfilling sense of having two cultures on which to draw?
5. How is Polly Bemis' story like pioneer narratives in general? How is it unlike?
6. What does McCunn gain by inventing dialogue for characters in her story?
7. How much actual sense of history does McCunn give her readers? Does the narrative style she has chosen limit her ability to present background?
8. In Chapter 8, Ding says to Lalu, "Don't you understand, you cannot escape your fate?" (p. 77) How does this book embody the debate on predestination vs. determining one's own future?
9. Discuss the various meanings behind the title, "Thousand Pieces of Gold." Do you think it is an appropriate title for this book?
10. Do you think the author presents a realistic portrait of race relations in a small, yet polarized American community? How about the role of women in a largely male community? Discuss how you think it feels to be a minority in a similar situation.
11. During the course of the book did you ever think Lalu fit into the role of a "China doll"? If so, when does her status start to change and what events contribute to her eventual liberation?
12. Does Jim's concern for Lalu match the brief relationship she had with the bandit Ding? How do the two relationships differ?

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13. Lalu is told by Charlie that a Chinese person in America cannot own land. Considering Lalu's love of farming and land, does she ever accept this concept? Give examples of her defiance and perseverance.
14. To what degree does Lalu loosen her ties with her Chinese background? Mention some examples from the book.

We Sagebrush Folk

1. Westerners and western novelists, from Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House on the Prairie* to Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose* have envisioned women homesteaders as the bearers of civilization. Men homesteaders were daring and restless, battling the earth and the elements and always ready to move on in search of fresh opportunities. Women, in contrast, sought to put down roots and endure. They built homes, passed the rudiments of education and civilization on to their children, pushed for churches and schools, and guarded their complexions from the harsh western sun. To what extent do the Greenwoods fit this stereotypical pattern?
2. Minidoka homesteaders battled with nature, seeking to subdue and control it: they replaced sagebrush with cash crops, worked to bring water where no rain fell, exterminated rabbits. In order to create paradise, they had to be tough enough to survive adversity, much of it natural adversity. This adversarial relationship with nature often persists in contemporary Idaho, leading some to fear that our efforts to exploit nature for our benefit will end by destroying the state. Some suggest replacing the battle image of man vs. nature with a metaphor emphasizing cooperation between man and nature. How does *We Sagebrush Folks* help to illuminate the ongoing effort to achieve a balanced relationship between man and nature?
3. This book is filled with wonderful, forgotten details from homesteaders' lives—the fact that farm women sometimes used schools as day care centers, for example, or the incredible joys of a community's first ice cream machine. What are some other such details, and how do they enrich our understanding of the homesteaders' experience?
4. How would this work have been different if it had been written as a daily diary?
5. How essential is Greenwood's education to her perspective?



Where the Morning Light's Still Blue

1. What are your favorite essays in this collection? Why?
2. Which essays best capture a "sense of place" for you? Share examples.
3. If you had been asked to contribute to this book, what (or where) would you have written about?