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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Bottomland by Michelle Hoover

Summary

Though Jon Julius and his wife Margrit have been settled on their Midwestern land for over twenty years, their German heritage and dual loyalties are looked upon by neighbors with great suspicion and alarm. When the youngest two daughters vanish in the middle of the night, the family must piece together what happened while struggling to maintain their life on the unforgiving Iowa plains. Have the girls run away to another homestead? Have they gone to a city to seek a new life? Or were they abducted? In the weeks after Esther and Myrle's disappearance, their siblings desperately search for them, combing the nearby stark farmlands and traveling to the unfamiliar world of far-off Chicago. Ostracized, misunderstood, and increasingly isolated in their small town in the wake of the war, the Hesses fear the worst.

Bottomland is a haunting story of pride, love, and betrayal, set amid the rugged terrain of Iowa, the fields of war-torn Flanders, and the bustling industrial streets of Chicago. With exquisite lyricism, Michelle Hoover deftly examines the intrepid ways a person can forge a life of their own despite the dangerous obstacles of prejudice and oppression.

Discussion Questions

1. Michelle Hoover begins the novel, *Bottomland* with a quote from a poem by Margo Taft Stever called *Bottom Land*, which is about motherhood. What does this novel have to say about motherhood?
2. Why is the Hess family so reluctant to believe that Myrle and Esther are really gone?
3. The first perspective in this book is from Nan's point of view and she recounts her last sight of Myrle. She seems to be judging her lack of motherly instinct although she is only a few years older than Esther and Myrle. Why does she hold herself responsible for the girls?
4. Consider the following quote that takes place when the siblings first discover the missing girls:
*"Let's not tell Father," Ray said. "Not yet."
"How can we not tell him?" I asked. But Father, he'd gotten into the habit of sleeping late. Ever since Mother went, the work had fallen more and more to us, while Father walked the property from one end to the next as if counting pennies."*
Why do the siblings choose not to tell their father?

5. This book contains elements of a mystery, although you start to find out what happened from Esther's point of view. How do the two stories (the girl's disappearance and the families isolation as immigrants) work together to keep you guessing on what really happened?
6. In the book, the river is featured in both the Iowa and Chicago settings. Apart from a border what else does the river or water symbolize in this novel? Is the river in Chicago different in nature from the one at the family's farm in Iowa?
7. Lee blames himself for things being broken, starting with the stone in his pocket which lead to Ray getting his hand mangled and continued with the chain of misfortune. How is his perspective different than Nan's?
8. What is Esther's reason for running away? How is her motivation different than her siblings? How is it the same?
9. There are five different narrators. Are there one or two that stood out as most effective in telling the overall story? Or in setting the mood?
10. Hardship is a given for the entire family, yet the girls escape to an unknown world with no fewer hardships. Is it believable that girls as young as Esther and Myrle would run off permanently and successfully?
11. The Hess family is subject to prejudice because of their country of origin. How is this similar to/different from discrimination that first-generation families experience in the US in 2017?
12. Iowa has a mixed history of sometimes supporting civil rights and immigrants, and other times being less welcoming. How does Bottomland's portrayal of small-town Iowa a hundred years ago reflect the state's heritage?
13. Who, as a group, is stronger, the sisters or the brothers (plus the father)? Why?
14. We learn a great deal about the day-to-day existences of two different worlds: The Chicago factory and the Iowa hardscrabble farm. Which has more resonance for the modern Midwest? Is one more revealing or surprising than the other?
15. Lee's story revolves around his World War I experience, but it doesn't directly contribute to the larger narrative. How is his war story significant? How would it have affected the rest of the story if it had not been included?

Summary from the publisher. Discussion Questions from Iowa Center for the Book.