



6700 Merle Hay Road, Johnston, IA 50131 • Voice: 515-278-5233 • Fax: 515-278-4975 • info@johnstonlibrary.com

Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

I Will Send Rain by Rae Meadows

Summary

Annie Bell can't escape the dust. It's in her hair, covering the windowsills, coating the animals in the barn, in the corners of her children's dry, cracked lips. It's 1934 and the Bell farm in Mulehead, Oklahoma is struggling as the earliest storms of The Dust Bowl descend. All around them the wheat harvests are drying out and people are packing up their belongings as storms lay waste to the Great Plains. As the Bells wait for the rains to come, Annie and each member of her family are pulled in different directions. Annie's fragile young son, Fred, suffers from dust pneumonia; her headstrong daughter, Birdie, flush with first love, is choosing a dangerous path out of Mulehead; and Samuel, her husband, is plagued by disturbing dreams of rain.

As Annie, desperate for an escape of her own, flirts with the affections of an unlikely admirer, she must choose who she is going to become. With her warm storytelling and beautiful prose, Rae Meadows brings to life an unforgettable family that faces hardship with rare grit and determination. Rich in detail and epic in scope, *I Will Send Rain* is a powerful novel of upheaval and resilience, filled with hope, morality, and love.

Discussion Questions

1. *I Will Send Rain* is an unusually visceral novel, one the reader feels very specially, along with its characters. Why is this important? How does the physical world in which the Bells struggle reveal their character? Is “place” generally important to you in a novel?
2. It's difficult to imagine making the decision the Bells make, to stay and face unyielding drought and massive rolling dust storms. What is it that makes them stay? Stubbornness or denial? Fear, optimism, fatalism? Or something else? Would you stay, or leave the life you've built behind?
3. “Connection to the land”—a concept familiar in the early part of the twentieth century, less so now—explains, in part, why the Bells don't leave when the dust comes. What does it mean to you to be connected to the land? Is it something you sympathize with in this story? Would it be enough for you to stay?

4. While Meadows narrates the bulk of her story from Annie's perspective, we also see through Samuel's, Birdie's, and Fred's eyes. How does this narrative choice enrich and further the story?
5. A key theme in *I Will Send Rain* is what it means to be a mother. What does it mean for Annie Bell, a woman trying to keep her family together when all she's known has dried up and blown away? What does it mean for you? Would it shift if the life you now know were to change so dramatically?
6. Meadows asks the Bells to find meaning in the incomprehensible. How does this inform her story, and how does the quest for meaning define her characters? What do they gain and lose? What do they take from one another?
7. Each of the Bells harbors a secret dream of escape: for Annie, an illicit relationship; for Samuel, religious faith; for Birdie, a first love with a local boy; for Fred, a complex internal world. What do these modes of escape teach you about these characters?
8. To some readers, Samuel comes across as the character least connected to reality—and within the story, becomes the object of public ridicule—as he pursues an unusual spiritual path. What do you think of his mission—does he believe his visions, or is he looking for a sense of purpose? What do you think Meadows intended to convey through the larger religious threads woven throughout the narrative?
9. One could argue that Fred is both the most detached and the most present of the Bells; though a child, he sees much with great clarity. How does this advance the storyline? How does it illuminate the rest of the characters? In what ways, large and small, is he an emotional catalyst within the novel?
10. Why do you think Meadows chose to render Fred as mute?
11. Annie entertains a choice that will destroy the fragile bonds holding her family together. Is it with the hope of escape, or rebellion against a God she's lost faith in? Do you sympathize with her, or find fault? Do you like Annie Bell—and if not, can you at least understand her? At the story's end, in the wake of unthinkable tragedy and loss, she makes a different choice. Would you have made the same decision?
12. What role has duty played (or not) in the choices Annie's made throughout her life? Does it play a role in the choice she makes at the novel's end?
13. Consider the novel's overarching themes of family and love, faith and resilience and hope. How are they explored here? Is the story, in the end, a hopeful one?

Summary from the publisher. Discussion Questions from PrincetonBookReview.com.