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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **Little Wolves** by Thomas Maltman

#### Summary

Set on the Minnesota prairie in the late 1980's during a drought season that's pushing family farms to the brink, *Little Wolves* features the intertwining stories of a father searching for answers after his son commits a heinous murder, and a pastor's wife (and washed-out scholar of early Anglo-Saxon literature) who has returned to the town for mysterious reasons of her own. A penetrating look at small-town America, *Little Wolves* weaves together elements of folklore and Norse mythology while being driven by a powerful murder mystery; a page-turning literary triumph.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Is it cruel or kind for a human to nurture a motherless young animal? Do such animals grow up to become "unnatural" among their species?
2. Abandonment of a child, through death or deliberate actions, is a common occurrence in this novel. If teenaged Seth had been orphaned prior to the murders would you have been willing to adopt him? Was he a hero or a villain?
3. What is a citizen's responsibility when he learns that a person in a position of civil authority is a lawbreaker and evil doer? Did Seth have options other than murder to remove the sheriff?
4. Ministry seems an odd vocational choice for Logan, who was raised by agnostic parents. Clara also seems to be a very atypical minister's wife. How did she struggle in that role and how did her beliefs evolve over time?
5. Clara and Seth were both fascinated by the Norse and American mythology that she shared with her English classes. What did these myths mean to each of them? What was the nature of the relationship between Clara and Seth?
6. Is Lone Mountain an ironic name for a prairie town situated next to a hill? What is the meaning of this name in the context of this story? Were Logan and Clara wrong in trying to make a home there?
7. Seth seemed obsessed with "wergild" the concept of blood debt. What does this term mean? How did many years of bad blood between the Gunderson and Fallon families contribute to "wergild" for the present generations?



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8. Grizz is a complex character who has experienced tremendous loss. Why is it so important for him to bury his son on his own terms? What does he learn about vengeance?
9. Drought is a factor in this story, but it is the cold that brings about life changing events for these characters. This is a story of cold people in a cold land committing cold-blooded acts that are foreshadowed by the legends of their ancestors from frigid northern lands. What roles do climate and natural setting play in the storytelling?
10. At the end of the novel, Grizz and Lee seem to be developing a sort of father/son relationship. Does this seem contrived in light of the Fallon family's role in the death of Lee's father, and Lee's awkward attempt to shoot Grizz? Is it a matter of two needy people reaching out to one another?

Additional Questions from Thomas Maltman:

1. The little wolves of the title are a mysterious and ominous presence in the novel. What, if anything, do you think they represent?
2. Throughout history, myths have been a mechanism for people to explain natural phenomena, and *Little Wolves* is steeped in mythology, both Norse and American. What role do natural phenomena (like snowstorms, or droughts) and the accompanying mythology play in the book?
3. Why does Clara's mother haunt her? In what ways has becoming pregnant changed her priorities and needs, if at all? In general, how does expecting a child—or losing a child—refocus and change the parents in *Little Wolves*? The town at large?
4. Why does Sheriff Gunderson keep that hunting cabin back in the woods? In the oldest monster stories, evil came from outside, a threat from strangers. Are there monsters in this novel? How have different cultures explained evil through the ages?

Discussion Questions from <http://www.iowacenterforthebook.org>