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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Many Hands Make Light Work: A Memoir by Cheryl Stritzel McCarthy

Summary

Many Hands Make Light Work is the rollicking true story of a family of nine children growing up in the college town of Ames, Iowa in the '60s and '70s. Inspiring, full of surprises, and laugh-out-loud funny, this utterly unique family champions diversity and inclusion long before such concepts become cultural flashpoints.

Cheryl and her siblings are the offspring of an eccentric professor father and unflappable mother. Mindful of their ever-expanding family's need for cash, her parents begin acquiring tumbledown houses in campus-town, to renovate and rent. Dad, who changes out of his suit and tie into a carpenter's battered white overalls, like Clark Kent into Superman, is supremely confident his offspring can do anything, whether he's there or not. Mom, an organizational genius disguised as a housewife, manages nine children so deftly that she finds the time—and heart—to take in student boarders, who stir their own offbeat personalities into this unconventional household. The kids, meanwhile, pour concrete, paint houses, and, at odd moments, break into song, because instead of complaining, they sing as they work, like a von Trapp family in painters caps.

Free-wheeling and contagiously cheerful, *Many Hands Make Light Work* is a winsome memoir of a Heartland childhood unlike any other.

Discussion Questions

1. How did you experience this book? Did it make you feel nostalgic for your own family? Were you glad you weren't part of a large family? Did the book make you feel happy, sad, lonely, angry, or something else?
2. How do the 60s and 70s of the book relate to your own childhood? Were you born before, during, or after this time?
3. What are your thoughts about parents making their children work in a family business? What are the author's thoughts? Is she glad she grew up this way or angry that her father took advantage of her?
4. How does the author relate her own history to current events in the larger world? Does she discuss the counterculture, Vietnam War, racial issues, etc.?
5. The English proverb *Many hands make light work* dates back to the 1300s. Why did the author choose this proverb for the title of her book?

6. This biography takes place mostly in Ames, Iowa, a mostly white community with students and faculty from other countries and other cultures. How does the author address racial and cultural issues?
7. How do the parents keep their large family organized? Discuss your thoughts about the family dynamics – how the parents relate to each other and their children, how the siblings relate to their parents and each other.
8. This book is considered a “feel-good memoir.” Do you think the author’s happy memories are genuine or is she putting a positive spin on her memories after the fact?
9. Which of the author’s stories (or chapters) in the book was your favorite? Which story (or chapter) did you like the least?
10. If you could ask the author a question, what would it be?

Summary from the publisher
Discussion questions prepared by JPL staff