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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

The Past by Tessa Hadley

Summary

Three sisters and a brother, complete with children, a new wife, and an ex-boyfriend's son, descend on their grandparents' dilapidated old home in the Somerset countryside for a final summer holiday.

Simmering tensions and secrets rise to the surface over three long, hot weeks. The house is full of memories of their childhood and their past—their mother took them there to live when she left their father—but now, they may have to sell it. And beneath the idyllic pastoral surface lie tensions.

Sophisticated and sleek, Roland's new wife (his third) arouses his sisters' jealousies and insecurities. Kasim, the twenty-year-old son of Alice's ex-boyfriend, becomes enchanted with Molly, Roland's sixteen-year-old daughter. Fran's young children make an unsettling discovery in an abandoned cottage in the woods that shatters their innocence.

Passion erupts where it's least expected, leveling the quiet self-possession of Harriet, the eldest sister. As the family's stories and silences intertwine, small disturbances build into familial crises, and a way of life—bourgeois, literate, ritualized, Anglican—winds down to its inevitable end.

Over five novels and two collections of stories, Tessa Hadley has earned a reputation as a fiction writer of remarkable gifts. She brings all of her considerable skill to *The Past*, a work of breathtaking scope and beauty—her most ambitious and accomplished novel yet. (From the publisher.)

Discussion Questions

1. Talk about the book's title and the role the past plays in the adult Crane siblings' lives. Can any of us escape the hold that the past has on our lives? Can the Crane family?
2. Why does Kington have such a deep psychological pull over the Crane children?
3. Describe each of the four Crane siblings: Harriet, Alice, Fran, and Roland. How are their lives portrayed by Tessa Hadley? Whom do you find most sympathetic and whom least?

4. Why do Roland's sisters continue to dismiss him, even see him as "slightly ridiculous," when he has so obviously made a success of his life? Is their treatment of him a fair assessment or simply mean spirited?
5. Both Pilar and Kasim are "outsiders" when it comes to British society. How does the author use them to reflect both the "archetypally English" scene, as well as each of the Crane siblings? What different perspective do they bring to the story?
6. What role does class—or class division—play in this novel? What affect does it have on the Crane family, both in the present and the past?
7. Using the rural setting of Kington, Hadley hearkens back to an ancient literary form, the "pastoral," a form that incorporates erotic encounters—the mythical god Pan who pursues wood nymphs and shepherdesses, for one. Talk about the ways sexual desire plays out in this novel.

(Questions by LitLovers.)