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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **The Seed Keeper** by Diane Wilson

#### Summary

Rosalie Iron Wing has grown up in the woods with her father, Ray, a former science teacher who tells her stories of plants, of the stars, of the origins of the Dakota people. Until, one morning, Ray doesn't return from checking his traps. Told she has no family, Rosalie is sent to live with a foster family in nearby Mankato—where the reserved, bookish teenager meets rebellious Gaby Makespeace, in a friendship that transcends the damaged legacies they've inherited.

On a winter's day many years later, Rosalie returns to her childhood home. A widow and mother, she has spent the previous two decades on her white husband's farm, finding solace in her garden even as the farm is threatened first by drought and then by a predatory chemical company. Now, grieving, Rosalie begins to confront the past, on a search for family, identity, and a community where she can finally belong. In the process, she learns what it means to be descended from women with souls of iron—women who have protected their families, their traditions, and a precious cache of seeds through generations of hardship and loss, through war and the insidious trauma of boarding schools.

Weaving together the voices of four indelible women, *The Seed Keeper* is a beautifully told story of reawakening, of remembering our original relationship to the seeds and, through them, to our ancestors.

#### Discussion Questions

1. Consider the way the various timelines and characters are tied together in the conclusion of the novel. In what ways can readers of *The Seed Keeper* use these interwoven stories to reflect on intergenerational trauma, and more broadly, the role the past plays in the present and future, particularly in Indigenous communities?
2. In the Author's Note, Diane Wilson tells us that this story was inspired by the true story of Dakhóta women hiding seeds in their skirts while being forcibly removed from their homelands, noting that they are "the reason why we have Dakhóta corn today" (364). What does this story suggest about the nature of sacrifice?
3. Rosalie and Ida's friendship is a powerful reminder that while we inherit a past legacy from those who come before us, we each get to choose the way we allow that legacy to influence how we conduct our lives. Can we glean lessons on reconciliation, with others and with the earth, from this relationship? If so, what might they be? If not, why do you think that is?

4. The closing epigraph of this book is a prayer: “Love the seeds as you love your children, and the people will survive. Wačhékiye.” (361) Consider this prayer and Rosalie’s connection with her son. What might the significance of this parallel between Wakpa/Tommy and the seeds be? What do you think happens after the novel ends, and how might the seeds act as a bridge for him to find his way back to his own Dakhóta heritage?
5. The Seed Keeper grapples directly with themes of environmental degradation, specifically at the hands of corporate agriculture and genetically modified seeds protected by copyright. Ultimately, this corporate agricultural industry impacts the entire community in which Rosalie and her family are living. What elements of this conflict struck you? What impacts are industries like this one having on communities today?
6. Rosalie and Gaby are frequently portrayed as opposites (Rosalie calls them “the mouth and the ears”). Compare and contrast their approaches to activism and their relationships to identity/community. What does their friendship tell us about the different roles we can play in social movements? What do you think Rosalie and Gaby learn from each other?
7. How does Wilson feature storytelling within Rosalie’s community and personal story (in linear and non-linear ways) to enrich history and legacy within the characters?
8. The Seed Keeper highlights the tension between viewing seeds through a lens of reciprocity in opposition to regarding seeds solely as commodities. How does Wilson illustrate this tension in the ways Rosalie and her husband John communicate and interact?
9. When she isn’t writing, Wilson works with the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance. This nonprofit organization works to support Native communities in reclaiming their sovereign food systems. Share an example of a food item, meal, or method of gathering, cooking, or sharing that has taught you something meaningful about your identity and connection to your ancestors.
10. Which tribes and Indigenous communities live near your home? Which crops and harvests do they hold sacred and are they still able to grow them? Have you eaten these foods?

Summary and Discussion Questions from [milkweed.org](http://milkweed.org)