



# Colorado Book Club Resource

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR MY ANTONIA BY WILLA CATHER

1. Why do you think Willa Cather chose to open the novel with the simultaneous arrival of Jim and the Shimerda family in Nebraska?
2. *Ántonia's* father, Mr. Shimerda, has a profound and lasting influence upon both *Ántonia* and Jim. Find the passages that illustrate this influence. In your own words, explain how and why this influence is so powerful for each of them.
3. The novel creates sharp contrasts between moments of great happiness and moments of deep sadness, grief and loss. In your opinion, what brings greatest happiness to *Ántonia* and Jim at different times in their lives?
4. In Book II, Jim moves from the country into the town of Black Hawk. Here he discovers a prevailing attitude about immigrants, "All foreigners were ignorant people who couldn't speak English." Instead of seeing the immigrant "hired girls" as inferior, Jim sees them as far superior to the other young people of Black Hawk. Why?
5. *My Ántonia* gives readers the opportunity to reflect on values that cannot be easily measured yet are essential to a life well lived. The entire novel might be seen as Jim's own journey to discover what these values are. For example, in Book III, section iv, Lena Lingard's landlord, Mr. Ordinsky, tells Jim, "kindness of heart...[is] not understood in a place like this. The noblest qualities are ridiculed." In your opinion, what contributes to Jim's understanding of "the noblest qualities"? How does *Ántonia* help Jim reach this understanding?
6. "Jake and Otto served us to the last...Those two fellows had been faithful to us through sun and storm, and had given us things that cannot be bought in any market in the world" is how Jim describes their departure. Find other examples in the novel of things that cannot be purchased, packaged or sold.
7. In a 1915 interview, Cather commented, "No one without a good ear can write good fiction." What particular passages in *My Ántonia* show Cather's "good ear" for the sound of language? Discuss how and why these passages capture the moods and themes of the novel.
8. Grandmother Burden is described as "a strong woman, of unusual endurance" in the early pages of Book I. Compare the different portraits of feminine strength and endurance in this novel. For example, compare *Ántonia*, Mrs. Harling and Grandmother Burden. What similarities and what differences do you see when you compare and contrast these three characters?



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9. The novel is concerned with the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of success. Do you think these two pursuits are one and the same in *My Ántonia*? Compare the achievement of Ántonia and the achievements of Tiny Soderball. How does Jim judge what it means to be “rich”?
10. *My Ántonia* contrasts characters who stay rooted to the land and those who emigrate or travel. By the end of the novel, who seems more rooted in Nebraska, Jim or Ántonia? Why is this ironic?
11. Where does Cather contrast Catholic and Protestant rituals? How do religious differences explain cultural misunderstandings?
12. Cather describes the plow “within the circle of the disk; the handles, the tongue, the share—black against the molten red. There it was heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun...Even while we whispered about it, our vision disappeared; the ball dropped and dropped until the red tip went beneath the earth...[and the plow sank] back into its own littleness somewhere on the prairie.” How does this visual image of the plow become an important symbol in the novel?
13. The black pianist Blind d’Arnault is portrayed as having an instinctive gift for music. Compare this portrait of d’Arnault with the assumptions made about other ethnic groups in the novel.
14. How does the novel address the promise and price of immigration?
15. Why does Jim add “my” to the title of his manuscript?

***Discussion questions courtesy of New York Public Library and were contributed by two faculty members from DePaul University’s Department of English and Master of Arts in Liberal Studies Program.***



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