



Colorado Book Club Resource

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR ETTA AND OTTO AND RUSSELL AND JAMES BY EMMA HOOPER

1. One day during their childhood years, Alma impressed her little sister Etta with a display of whitened fish bones, which Etta found strikingly beautiful: "What language do fish speak?" she asked. "Probably French," said Alma. "Like Grandma." Does the scene contain a clue to Etta's late-life journey?
2. During the journey, James the coyote begins to speak to Etta in human language; a little boy who has seen Etta says she was "maybe a witch or maybe a lady-Santa-Claus. She was magical." We are in a world of magic realism. What other subtle magic do you see in the novel? What role do you think this stylistic choice plays in the narrative?
3. Otto and Russell first learn about the war abroad through radio interviews, in which they hear a story about imprisoned children and babies who float through the prison window because they are so light from malnourishment. Discuss the meaning of this story. Where else in the novel do you come across storytelling or oral history?
4. Etta and Otto have long corresponded by letter, beginning with Otto's letter from the European front and continuing much later while Etta is hiking to the ocean. In what ways do letters at the beginning and the end of their relationship mirror one another? Why do you think Emma Hooper chose the epistolary form to convey many of the details in her novel?
5. When Russell finds Etta and tries to convince her to come home, she responds: "You're not actually here to fetch me.... You're here...because it's your turn, finally. It's sad that you felt you needed my permission for that, but, oh well. Go, Russell, go do whatever, wherever. Go do it alone, and now, because you want to and you're allowed to and you can." What has Etta learned on her trek that prompts her to encourage Russell to travel? What meaning do you think Russell is seeking when he rides north in search of caribou?
6. In the course of Etta's travels, she becomes a celebrity—as does Otto, at home, though both would rather have pursued their endeavors privately. What qualities do Etta's pilgrimage to the sea and Otto's papier-mâché projects share? What qualities distinguish them? What might these august achievements say about the nature of celebrity?
7. Russell does not return to his farm before the end of the novel, but in the latter part of the novel he sends a letter to Otto estimating that he "should be home" before autumn; then, still later, he is shown soliciting directions to the airport. How might his travels in the Northwest Territories have changed him?



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8. In one of his letters, Otto admits to Etta that he has "this idea that all these boys who have come to fill the places of the ones we've lost will fill their places exactly and be shot through or stabbed in the dark or blown up just like the last ones, exactly like them, one to one." His vision betrays disillusionment in the face of unremitting death on the battlefield. Do you think this is the author's statement about the nature of war? How have wars affected you or those close to you?
9. As Etta's journey gains national media attention, a journalist named Bryony decides unexpectedly to travel alongside her. Do you think Bryony's account of her brother's troubled life helps to explain that decision? Compare the loss of Bryony's brother to Etta's loss of her sister Alma.
10. At home, when husband and wife slept in the same bed, Etta tried to "sleep without any part of her touching any part of [Otto]," so that she would no longer be pulled into his dream. What was the dream? And while she lies in a hospital bed late in her journey, for a while her husband's identity replaces her own. How do you interpret this phenomenon?
11. In the final pages, Etta enters the ocean at last. At home in his bed, Otto breathes "easy and deep six times in a slow ritardando," and then he is "underwater." How do you interpret the lovers' meeting underwater, and their tender words as they sit there together? Why does the author return to the past in the final lines of the novel?

Questions issued by the publisher.



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