BOOK CLUB STUDY GUIDE

The Floor of the Sky by Pamela Carter Joern

Pamela Carter Joern’s novel about guilt and forgiveness is set in the Sandhills of Nebraska, a place as rugged and unyielding as her characters. Toby Jenkins, a 72-year old widow, aims to keep her ranch even though the local banker threatens to foreclose. Then Lila, her 16-year old pregnant granddaughter, shows up, metal-studded and angry. As the novel moves through one fast-paced summer, Joern’s subtle handling of the complexities of relationship and the changing face of rural Midwestern life leave the reader pondering, resonating, and cheering for Toby and her clan.

1. Toby and Gertie live in the Alhambra, an ornate Sears mail-order house built by their father in the heart of the Nebraska Sandhills. What meaning does the house hold for Toby? How does Toby’s relationship with the house reflect her relationship with both her parents? How does the incongruity of this ornate house on the prairie reflect the cultural/social setting for the book?

2. Joern suggests that living on the land shapes personality. What are the qualities shared by the characters that might be attributed to their devotion to this way of life? At the same time, Gertie and Toby exhibit profound differences, even though they were both raised on the ranch. How do you account for these differences?

3. The world of this novel constantly smacks tradition up against modernity. Things are changing on the rural landscape of America, and yet some things remain the same. What stays the same? What are some of the changes? Do you think the changes will result in necessary progress or irreparable loss?

4. What is Lila’s role in the novel? What difference does it make that she is from the city?

5. What are the family relationships explored in this story? Why does Joern choose two grandparent-grandchild roles? How would you describe the relationship between Lila and Clay? What is the purpose of including adoptive relationships? What does Joern seem to be saying about the “glue” that holds families together? What does George’s role have to say about how family is defined?

6. The novel moves through a series of community events: the branding, Camp Clarke Days, Lila’s birthday party. What is the significance of these events? What do we learn about the lives of these people and the times they are living in?

7. Some portrayals of the rural Midwest weigh heavily on nostalgia, sighing for the “good old days.” Others treat the rural Midwest as a cultural wasteland, something to fly over on the way to New York or California. What do you think the author’s attitude is about this area? What expectations do you hold about the rural Midwest that were either borne out or debunked by this book?
8. George says about Toby that “. . .the knowing of the truth settles her. This, he understands, is Toby’s great secret. This is how she has borne the sorrows of her life. She does not bar the gate against the truth.” If this is how Toby has borne the sorrows of her life, how have other characters chosen to deal with sorrow and loss? What are the repercussions of their choices?

9. George also says: “The trouble with this family, he has known for a long time, is that they all choose to be alone.” What does he mean? How is this played out with Toby and Gertie? And George? Does this change by the end of the book?

10. Who, if anyone, is the moral authority in the book? Who, if anyone, is the spiritual center? How do the different characters relate to religion?

11. The title, The Floor of the Sky, is taken from a quote by Willa Cather and refers to the big sky over the treeless plains. Joern pays careful attention to the landscape. How does this contribute to the mood of the book?

13. Although he’s dead when the book opens, Luther Bolden is a prevailing presence in the book. What sort of man was he? How did he affect the lives of each of his children? What do you think Joern is suggesting about power and apparent success?

14. What do we learn about Lila through her efforts to find a home for her child? Why does she choose Julia and Royce? Did you think that Julia and Royce would accept Lila’s baby? Were you surprised that Lila gave up her child for adoption?

15. At the end Toby and George are sitting on the porch of his house, facing east. What lies ahead for them? What do you think will happen to Toby’s land? Why do you think Joern ended the novel at this point?

Just for Fun: The Kirkus Review wrote “His [George’s] unspoken love makes for irresistible reading. . .(think Paul Newman with Joanne Woodward). . . A resonant love story, whatever the age of the lovers.” If you were making a movie, who would you cast as Toby and George?