

Readers' Guide for *Dakota, Or What's a Heaven For*

1. The physical setting of this novel, the northern plains of Dakota Territory, plays a central role in *Dakota, Or What's a Heaven For*. How would you describe this place? How does the novel's physical environment affect the personalities, temperaments, and actions of Dakota's inhabitants?
2. What is your response to the character of Frances Bingham? How would you define her and her motivations? What is it that she desires? What are her strengths and her limitations? What mistakes does she make? What does she get right?
3. How would you define the relationship between Frances and Kirsten at the end of the novel?
4. A character's use of language says a great deal about him or her. How is this true, for example, of Kirsten? Of Percy?
5. Alexander McKenzie, Moses K. Armstrong, and J. B. Power are fictionalized representations of real historical figures. Is it fair for an author to blur the lines between history and fiction through the use of such characters in a novel? What do you think the dangers and advantages are of this literary strategy?
6. A theme of transformation runs throughout the novel? Which characters experience personal transformations? What are the costs and gains of these transformations? How are the personal transformations a comment on the changes taking place in the political and cultural landscape of Dakota Territory as it moves toward statehood?
7. North Dakota and South Dakota today have a reputation for a lack of diversity in their populations. Now that you have read the novel, does this surprise you? Why or why not? How are the concepts of cultural sameness and difference important to this novel?
8. How does this novel's attention to gender complicate the story of independence that Dakotans like to tell about themselves?