

the story and the unbreakable connection between mother and child.

Library Journal

Hannah vividly evokes the natural beauty and danger of Alaska and paints a compelling portrait of a family in crisis and a community on the brink of change.

Booklist

(*Starred review.*) There are many great things about this book.... It will thrill her fans with its combination of Greek tragedy, Romeo and Juliet-like coming of age story and domestic potboiler. She recreates in magical detail the lives of Alaska's homesteaders ... and is just as specific and authentic in her depiction of the spiritual wounds of post-Vietnam America. A tour de force.

Kirkus Reviews

Discussion Questions

We'll add publisher questions if and when they're available; in the meantime, use our LitLovers talking points to help start a discussion for The Great Alone ... then take off on your own:

1. Describe the dynamics in the Allbright family. (Care to comment on the family name?) Consider Ernt's anger and its impact on Leni, as well as Cora's unerring devotion to her husband. Consider, too, how the family's frequent moves have affected 13-year-old Leni.
2. How has Vietnam and his prisoner-of-war experience affected Ernt? What inner scars does he carry around? How do the rigors of life in Kaneq causes Ernt's mental state to deteriorate?
3. Leni remarks about the people of Alaska that "Everyone up here had two stories: the life before and the life now." What does she mean and what (or who) prompts that observation?
4. What do you think of Large Marge, a former prosecutor who now runs the general store?
5. The novel presents us with three different perspectives from Leni: 1974, 1978, and 1986. How does her understanding of her family alter during those 12 years — what does she know in 1986 that she didn't know in 1974?
6. In her college application, Leni writes about her love of books with their journeys to foreign lands. She ends with this sentence: "Only recently have I learned why I needed those faraway worlds." What do those "faraway worlds" represent to Leni? Why has she needed them? Have you ever looked to literature as a sense of refuge?
7. In what way does Alaska function as a character within the novel? As Large Marge tells the Allbright family, "Alaska herself can be Sleeping Beauty one minute and a bitch with a sawed-off shotgun the next."

1. "It was otherworldly somehow, magical in its vast expanse. An incomparable landscape." (31) Alaska is definitely a character in this novel. The author clearly wants you to understand both the grandeur and danger that are present every day in the Last Frontier. How did the landscape create and shape this story? Is this a story that could have taken place anywhere? Or was the solitude of Alaska part of the fabric of the novel?

2. Alaska is called many things. The Last Frontier, The Land of the Midnight Sun, The Great Alone. How do you think these different nicknames describe different parts of the state?

3. What aspects of the Alaska/homesteader lifestyle would you find the most challenging in the wild? How would you handle the isolation, the interdependence among neighbors, the climate? Would you have what it takes to survive?

4. Large Marge tells Cora and Leni that "in Alaska, everyone is either running to something or running away from something." Do you think this is particularly true to wild places like Alaska? Or has it always been true of the American pioneer? How would you compare and contrast the homesteaders in Alaska to the pioneers in early America, who came west in covered wagons? How are the modern Alaska homesteaders different? How are they the same? What do you think draws people to the wild, unpredictable and remote corners of Alaska?

5. *The Great Alone* is set in the turbulent world of America in the 1970's. Why do you think the author chose this time period? How did the world at that time, with the political unrest and kidnappings and plane hijackings, factor into the plot? Why do you believe the back-to-the-earth movement spoke to so many people in the seventies? Why did it speak to Ernt?

6. Do you think the world feels dangerous today? Do you think the unrest and troubles of the seventies are relevant today? Can we learn from them? What

does *The Great Alone* have to say about the idea of turning one's back on civilization and the problems of society?

7. If you experienced the seventies, what was it like to read about those years? Did it match up with your memories of it, or color the story for you? Did the popular culture references remind you of your own life? And if you didn't experience the seventies, what did you learn about the era from the novel?

8. Ernt was a prisoner of war for several years. We know now about PTSD and the ways in which Ernt would have been suffering and the ways in which he could now be helped, but that help didn't exist in the seventies. Additionally, the Vietnam vets were often treated badly by people upon their return. How do you think Ernt's war experiences changed him? Do you believe, as Cora tells Leni, that he was "changed" when he came home? Did the war and PTSD "make" Ernt violent, or do you believe he was violent before?

9. Cora is a complicated character. When Leni is reminiscing about her mother and their days in the commune, she notes that "her mother changed her personality just enough to fit in." What do you think this passage tells us about Cora? Why do you think she stayed with Ernt all those years? Was it love? Fear? In general, why do you think women stay with abusive men?

10. One of the issues highlighted in the novel is the lack of legal support for women in the seventies. Large Marge often makes the point that the law can't help women like Cora, and Leni, even as young as she is, intuitively understands that only Cora can save herself. Do you think that was true then? Is it true today? Does the law do enough to help battered women?

11. Leni is shaped by the complexity of her parents' toxic relationship. How does she explain her life before she sees the truth of the violence? As is often the case in abusive families, Leni—the child—takes on the role of caretaker. How did it mold Leni's character, this need to keep the ugly truth of her family secret?

12. Would you say that Leni is a survivor? Is Cora?

13. "Your mother was a kite string. Without her strong, steady hold on you, you might just float away, be lost somewhere among the clouds." (126) If you have faced the loss of a loved one, did you find this quote to have special resonance for you? What did the author get right about this sentiment? How else would you describe a mother's influence? In many ways, *The Great Alone*, is a mother-daughter love story, but one with a broken spine. How did Cora let Leni down in life, how did she save her? Do you think Cora was a good mother?

14. Leni and Matthew experience first friendship and first love. There is an obvious Romeo-and-Juliet aspect to their love story. How did you feel about their relationship as it was growing? Did you root for them? Or did you feel that Leni was taking a terrible risk that was going to have dark consequences.

15. "This is dangerous, she thought again, but she couldn't make herself care. All she could think about now was Matthew, and how it had felt when he kissed her, and how much she wanted to kiss him again." (241) Do you recall your own days of young love and that rush of feeling? Do you think the experience is universal?

16. How did the building of Ernt's wall affect you as a reader? As he was building it, what did you think was going to happen? Did you think someone was going to kill Ernt? Who did you think the killer would be? Who did you want it to be?

17. Did you see Cora's explosive act of protection coming? What did it feel like to read that scene? As a parent, do you think you'd be capable of the same act, or write such a confessional letter?

18. Did you hold Leni responsible in your mind for any of Matthew's misfortune? Why or why not? How does Leni show her devotion in the end? Did you anticipate the kind of future that is set in motion for them at the close of the book?