

FROM KANSAS WHEAT FIELDS TO ALASKA TUNDRA:  
A Mennonite Family Finds Home

**By Naomi Gaede Penner**

Many of the questions are general rather than chapter-specific. You may find it helpful to look over the questions before you begin reading, and then refer to them as you complete each chapter. Pick and choose the ones that best fit your interests, your family, or your book group. Keep a notebook and jot down your responses as you go throughout the book.

1. The book uses the term “home place.” What does this mean to you? Why is it an integral part of the story? What tension is involved for Naomi in “finding a home place”?
2. How many times did you move before age eighteen? How do you think that has affected your life? How many times have you moved in your *entire* life? What has been the most difficult part? What managing skills have you used for these transitions?
3. The author frequently flashes back to the “home place” in Kansas. What purpose does this serve?
  - a. Shows Naomi’s struggles in finding “home.”
  - b. Juxtaposes Kansas and Alaska.
  - c. Evokes memories of “home place” for readers who grew up in the country or mid-west.
  - d. Illustrates how we idealize the “good ol’ days.”
  - e. Demonstrates how we can get stuck in the past and forget to look to the future.
  - f. Adds to the story/sidetracks the story.
4. Ruby coped with lack of conveniences in Tanana. Some of these occurred because of general life in the 1950s and others because of remoteness. Identify the lack of conveniences, i.e., clothes dryer, shopping centers, TV, internet connectivity, etc. Which would be most disconcerting for you? Explain. If fresh produce were unavailable, what would you miss most?

5. (Chapter 3) In Tanana, the Gaede family is isolated in a village of three hundred people. In winter, the reduced access to transportation increases this seclusion. Consider that Ruby has children ages newborn, two, six, and seven years old. Discuss the implications for “cabin fever,” seasonal affective disorder, and general mothering fatigue .
6. Mennonite tradition and culture is threaded through the story. Do you find it intriguing? Distracting? Overdone? Vital to understanding the Gaede family? If you are from a strong ethnic background, how do these stories parallel yours? How are your experiences different? What part does language play in our American society?
7. Do you think the description and/or characteristics of Mennonites that you read about in this book could be applied to other groups of people as well? Explain.
8. (Chapter 4) Make a list of the major stressors in Browning, Montana, such as culture, weather, work, and school. Examine how the individual family members responded. Naomi had a friend in every location except Browning. What difference do you think that made?
9. (Chapter 4) What is your reaction to the assault on Doc? How do you feel as you read about it? Why/why not should the author have included this?
10. What feelings do you experience when you read the following sections?
  - a. Naomi and her Browning depression (Chapter 4).
  - b. Ruth when she learns the family will be moving from Tulare, California to Soldotna, Alaska (Chapter 5).
  - c. Ruby when she drops the cherry mooss on the garage floor of the Clinic House (Chapter 7).
11. In chapter six, there is a *Cheechako News* article about fall-out supplies. In chapter nine, you read about a fall-out shelter added to the Gaede-Eighty homestead. In the 1950s and 1960s, the United States lived under the fear of nuclear attack from Russia and urged citizens to be prepared. If you lived during this time, discuss the following questions. If you did not, find an older person to interview:

- a. What was the purpose of bomb or fall-out shelters? What supplies were to be stored and why?
  - b. Did you have air-raid drills in school? What were you to do?
  - c. Did you see any movies, television programs, or newspapers that warned about nuclear destruction? How did this information make you feel?
  - d. How was the peril of nuclear attack and preparedness in the 1950s and 1960s similar or dissimilar to today's threat of terrorist attacks and/or natural disasters of tornadoes, earthquakes, tsunamis, and floods?
12. Which character do you most closely identify with: Doc, Ruby, Naomi, or Ruth? Explain. What personality and character traits do you most admire in these characters? What are your impressions of Mark? Mishal? If you were a character in the story, how would you have portrayed yourself? Survivor? Victim? Hero? Adventurer? True homesteader? City-boy/girl lost in the wilderness? Nature-lover? Reporter? Other?
13. Compare the traits of farmers to homesteaders. Discuss the similarities and differences. What character or personality traits do you have that would make you adaptable to living in the village of Tanana or homesteading on the Kenai Peninsula?
14. (Chapter 8) What part about "visiting" the homestead, appeals to you?
15. Discuss the responses of the individual family members to relocation. Which of the family members really find home in Alaska?
16. Have you ever gone back to a house where you lived previously? What was your first reaction? What flashed through your memory? What had changed? What emotions did you experience?
17. What is your favorite rhubarb recipe?

18. What is *your* prescription for adventure?

- Extreme sports?
- Challenging yourself?
- Doing something outside your comfort zone?
- Exploring the unknown—whether that is a wilderness, mountain top, ocean, third-world country, inner city, or volunteer service?
- Seeking to live on the edge?
- Going for an adrenalin rush?
- Living in an environment conducive to adventures?
- Using your natural abilities and individual interests with the results of an adventure?
- Watching for the extraordinary to pop into an ordinary day or circumstance?

*Don't be left out. Live life like an adventure!*