

Discussion Questions

1. This book culminates in 1962, when the author graduates from college, marries, and goes off to his first permanent job in Omaha, Nebraska. Uncertain of his final destination, he was “determined to get well beyond the slow rhythms of life in the small towns and rural culture of the Great Plains.” But he also expresses nostalgia for South Dakota and says on that “in a way I never want to leave. I am nourished by every visit (page 3).” Discuss Brokaw’s ambivalent attitude toward his home state.
2. At several places in the book, Brokaw discusses the original inhabitants of the land and expresses dismay at what white Americans have done to them. Because he doesn’t talk much about politics and public issues (aside from civil rights), why do you think he devotes so much space to American Indians?
3. At least a half-dozen times in the book, Brokaw lists and talks about values he learned as a child and which he associates with South Dakota: thrift, compassion, perspective, pragmatism, utilitarianism, hard work, self-reliance, self-esteem, practicality, productivity, mainstream Christianity, cleanliness, frugality, insularity, etc. How accurate do you think these attributes are?
4. While generally admiring in his descriptions of the culture of the state, Brokaw also approvingly cites author Kathleen Norris’s reference to contradictions and tensions existing in Dakota culture (page 21). What are some of these contradictions, in your opinion?
5. The author feels personally slighted when people sometimes mock South Dakota (page 22). How common do you think this is, and how do you react in similar circumstances?
6. Brokaw talks about small-town “Saturday nights” (pages 51-52). What was it about this phenomenon that is so memorable and so appealing to some people?
7. For grandmother Ethel, who had been raised in Minneapolis, adjusting to farm life on the prairie was a difficult task (page 52). Is this a common response of outsiders moving into the state, and can you empathize with the viewpoint?
8. Brokaw identifies the religion of his youth as “mainstream Christianity with a decided emphasis on joy and positive thinking, light on guilt and complicated ritual (page 79).” Is this a fair description of ordinary religious practice in the state?
9. Smoking was a common practice, and families were known by the brand of car they drove (usually Ford or Chevys) when Brokaw was a child (page 83). How have these and other cultural practices changed since then? History, it has been said, is the study

of continuity and change. What, in general, has remained continuous in the culture over time, and what has changed?

10. Discuss the family dynamics of the Brokaw family. For instance, do first-born children, like young Tom Brokaw, have a sense of special privilege (page 85)?
11. Without a TV in their house most of the time, young Tom felt cut off from the world (page 90). What do you remember about TV watching when you were a child, and how did TV change your and other people's lives?
12. At age twelve, Tom traveled by bus to Minneapolis with a schoolmate (pages 90-92). How have things changed since then? Or could a twelve-year-old still do that?
13. Brokaw names some of the "seminal figures" in his life (besides his parents, they were mostly teachers). How important are such people in kids' lives?
14. Brokaw notes various qualities of his that helped open up opportunities for him. Especially important, it seems, was his ability in sports. But he also notes that sports are often overemphasized in small-town America (page 115). Do you agree? What do you think the appeal of sports is to local people?
15. In what did schoolboy Tom Brokaw's rebellion consist? He observes that "the idea of rebelling against convention or authority was not in my makeup (page 131)". How much room for rebelliousness is available in small-town South Dakota (and American generally)? How has the situation changed since Brokaw's school days?
16. Cracks in the culture began to appear and a new youth culture emerged in the United States during Brokaw's high school and college years. He mentions James Dean, Elvis, rock and roll, and other changes (pages 143-145). Discuss the variety of factors that "opened up" alternatives, options, and choices for youth during and after the fifties.
17. Brokaw was a kind of "All-American boy" in high school. Would you have liked him? Do you like him now? What's to like or not to like about him?
18. Do his descriptions of life in high school and college ring true? Why or why not?
19. Knowing what we know about him from his book, was his future success likely, in your opinion?
20. In considering jobs that he might do, young Tom thought of the law, politics, and journalism. He wanted a life of action, but he also wanted security (page 163). Was

he being realistic? How do most young people think about the future, the jobs they want to get into, and the kinds of lives they want to lead?

21. “Local radio was, in many ways, the central nervous system of the Midwest (page 169).” Is that still true today? How has life changed?
22. “As a young white male in the fifties, I was a member of the ruling class It was a white man’s and white boy’s world (page 176).” In your opinion, was this true? If so, was it fair? Have things changed much since then?
23. The author quotes novelist Saul Bellow’s statement, “Tell me where you come from and I will tell you what you are (page 229).” Do you agree with that idea? Does it help explain who you are?

Note: Information was attained from one of the South Dakota Book Bag Study Guides (a project supported with funding from the South Dakota Humanities Council).

<http://library.sd.gov/PROG/sdbookbag/index.aspx>