

Discussion Questions

1. In linking both Dakotas together in her title, Norris implies that the cultures of North and South Dakota are similar or identical. Do you think that is true?
2. Local history is often not very truthful, according to Norris (page 81). She asks, “How do we tell the truth in a small town? Is it possible to write it?” (page 79) Discuss.
3. “The truth, the whole truth, tends to be complex, its contentments and joys wrestled out of doubt, pain, change.” (page 79) Comment.
4. Norris quotes Jose Ortega y Gasset at the beginning of the book: “Tell me the landscape in which you live, and I will tell you who you are.” Does this apply to you?
5. Norris writes, “More than any other place I lived as a child or young adult — Virginia, Illinois, Hawaii, Vermont, New York — this is my spiritual geography, the place where I’ve wrestled my story out of the circumstances of landscape and inheritance.” (page 2) Do you feel a similar reaction to place? Which is the most important one to you, and how has it affected your “spiritual geography”?
6. Moving to Lemmon was a “counter-cultural” choice for Norris (page 3). How do you interpret her use of the word, and does it seem to fit what she is talking about? Does this require us to think differently about the term “counter-cultural”?
7. A central fact of the environment around Lemmon is out-migration and depopulation, a condition that afflicts many parts of South Dakota. How does what she writes help you to think about this phenomenon?
8. Norris is a writer, and, of necessity, a reader, and she naturally thinks a lot about reading. She refers to it as a solitary act but also, paradoxically, as a public one and one that “deepens my connections with the larger world” (page 15). How do you think about the reading that you do?
9. Too often, metropolitan residents relegate less populous regions of the country to a condition of “forgotten people in a mass-market society.” Places like Dakota may be seen primarily as places to fly over, deposit nuclear waste, dump garbage, and install missiles (pages 16-27). How do you view and react to these stereotypes?
10. Norris suggests that during the 1980's the Dakotas began trying to promote economic development by advertising themselves as low-tax, low-wage states with hard working, highly skilled, and dependable work forces (page 28). First of all, is this an accurate description of the strategy? If it is accurate, is it the best approach, in your opinion?

11. Norris's observation that Dakotans' inability to do much to influence big business or big government has resulted in turning the population into a sort of "underclass" (page 31) coincides with the notion that the region has historically been an economic "colony" to and culturally inferior to the East (page 33). What truth is there in these notions?
12. People in the Dakotas seem somewhat schizophrenic in their high self-regard and in their thought that this is "God's country," while at the same time harboring feelings of uncertainty and low self-esteem (page 32). Does this just reflect the usual kind of ambivalence that people maintain toward the places they live, or is there something more significant going on here?
13. Norris says she "tried on" her grandmother's Presbyterian church (page 92). Have you observed this kind of activity (or perhaps have you been involved in it yourself)? What does it say about changes going on in the culture? Are Americans today more prone to "try on" political views, lifestyles, and other modes of behavior than they used to?
14. Norris presents various definitions of "sin"— failure to do concrete acts of love, failure to follow rules, etc. (page 97). Is her discussion on this point useful?
15. What do you think Norris means by "spirituality"? Do her discussions of it increase our understanding of the subject?
16. Norris quotes poet David Allen Evans on relations between whites and Indians in South Dakota: too often, they "live alone together" (page 108). Is this an accurate description, in your opinion? How might we improve the situation?
17. Norris understands how the eye can "appreciate slight variations" (page 156). She possesses the subtle antennae of the poet. How does her book enhance our ability to see and to be aware of the world around us in all of its variety?

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