

Discussion Questions

1. Hasselstrom began as a poet and continues to write poetry. Do you detect a poetic impulse in her prose writing?
2. In the course of this book, she mentions about two dozen different plants and a similar number of animals. Can you give other examples of her close attention to particular details? Do you think this is an asset of her writing?
3. Hasselstrom intended to get a Ph.D. in English at the University of Missouri. Do you think she was wise not to follow through with that plan? What is her general attitude toward academics and academic programs, as expressed in this book? Do you agree with that line of thinking?
4. How would you respond to members of the book club who did not like the book because they could not believe the author was telling the truth? How important do you think it is for non-fiction authors to tell the whole truth? How much leeway would you be willing to give them in making up their stories?
5. The author writes on page 8, "No single truth is possible." What do you think she means by that, and do you agree with the premise?
6. "Any choice in this country is a balancing of the odds, and then taking a gamble anyway. No matter what you decide, the land or weather may have other plans," Hasselstrom writes on page 18. Has this been your experience? Do you think residents on the land have to be, in some sense, gamblers?
7. In the introduction, the author notes the tone of condescension or ridicule that outsiders often direct at South Dakota and other Plains residents. They've been called the "empty quarter," "flyover country," and "the outback" and have been associated with uranium mines and waste disposal sites. Have you observed or experienced similar tendencies, or do you think Hasselstrom is exaggerating the phenomenon?
8. What do you think are the characteristic qualities of West River ranchers and of South Dakotans in general?
9. How effective, in your opinion, is the narrative device of a trip through twelve gates as an organizing principle for the points the author wants to make about ranching and life in West River South Dakota? Would it have been just as effective had she simply written chapters devoted to various themes like ecology, community, and the economics of ranching?

10. Hasselstrom observes that she has a penchant for metaphor (page 128). A pile of rock becomes an occasion for her to describe the meaning of mystery. "I'm content not knowing, and surprised to be," she writes. "Can it mean I'm becoming mature, when I don't need to know all the answers." Are we witnessing a contradiction here — between her general curiosity about the meaning and significance of things, on the one hand, and willingness to accept that she doesn't know all the answers, on the other? Or is this acknowledgement a sign of wisdom?
11. Is the same inclination to admit that we cannot always be in control of things operating (page 34) when she abjures trying to prevent her stepson from chewing gum on their ride across the prairie, acknowledging, "I can't change his habits in a summer"? She seems to be caught in tension between a desire to change people and the world and an admission that change cannot always be had on our own terms.
12. What political party do you think she belongs to? Does packing a pistol in the pickup before they take off (page 13) have any political implications, in your opinion?
13. Hasselstrom seems to have an unusual interest in junk, discarded items, garbage, and animal and human waste. Or is her interest and attention unusual?
14. The author introduces the subject of Native Americans with a story about Emma, who makes and sells Indian dolls dressed in historically authentic clothing (page 34). What is her attitude, in general toward American Indians? What does she think we can learn from them?
15. Discuss the criticisms Hasselstrom has of corporate agriculture, television and mass culture in general, cities, intellectuals, consumerism, and the "throw-away society."
16. On page 122, the author insists on the importance of mutual accountability: "Many of us simply aren't aware of the size and scope of our responsibilities to one another." What could we do to change that?

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>