



Discussion Questions

The Four Winds by Kristin Hannah

1. "Hope is a coin I carry. . . . There were times in my journey when it felt as if that penny and the hope it represented were the only things that kept me going." (1) What is the significance of the fact that it is an American penny? In what ways does hope anchor us in the moment, and in what ways does it push us forward? Do you or your family have any keepsakes that represent your family's hope for the future?

2. "But we women of the Great Plains worked from sunup to sundown, too, toiled on wheat farms until we were as dry and baked as the land we loved." (1) The stories of women have largely gone undocumented throughout history, and this era is no different. It is changing, slowly, and women's courage and determination and victories are being brought to light. How are women's stories different? Why do you think they've gone unreported for so long? Do you think sharing these stories will make a difference to future generations?

3. Life was very different for unmarried young women in earlier generations. Expectations for their future were sharply defined. How is Elsa shaped by these expectations and her failure to meet them? Do you think it would have been the same for her in New York City? Did you feel compressed by expectation when you were growing up? Do you think these societal mores were designed to keep women "in their place"? How difficult is it to defy both family and society in a small town?

4. "She wished she'd never read *The Age of Innocence*. What good came from all this unexpressed longing? She would never fall in love, never have a child of her own." (8) Literature is, quite honestly, the opening of a door. Through that door, Elsa saw whole other lives, other futures. What books influenced you when you were growing up? Did any novel and/or character change your perception of either yourself or the world? Did you identify with Elsa and her journey throughout this book? In what way?

5. "She had to believe there was grit in her, even if it had never been tested or revealed." (9) This sentence highlights Elsa's essentially hopeful nature, even though she doesn't believe in herself. Her family and her world have pared her down to inconsequence. Does this idea resonate with you? Have you seen it at work in other people? In yourself?

6. In 1920s America, there was significant prejudice against Italians; we see that prejudice in Elsa's own family. What does Rafe represent to Elsa on the night they meet? Is it simply sex and loneliness? Or do you think there's something deeper involved? Another small defiance against her parents' small-mindedness? What does it say about Elsa that she went with Rafe so willingly?

7. "My land tells its story if you listen. The story of our family. We plant, we tend, we harvest. I make wine from grape cuttings that I brought here from Sicily, and the wine I make reminds me of my father. It binds us, one to another, as it has for generations. Now it will bind you to us." (51) How are people connected to the land that they occupy? What about the land they farm? Describe that unique and complicated connection.

8. Motherhood changes Elsa in almost every way. What does she learn by becoming a mother? What does she learn about motherhood from Rose? How does motherhood strengthen a woman? How does it weaken her? How does Elsa remain "herself" after giving birth? How does she change?

9. Few things can break a woman's heart like motherhood. "Elsa grieved daily for the loss of that closeness with her firstborn. At first she'd tried to scale the walls of her daughter's adolescent, irrational anger; she'd volleyed back with words of love, but Loreda's continuing, thriving impatience with Elsa had done worse than grind her down. It had resurrected all the insecurities.

10. The adolescent years can be especially difficult on mothers and daughters. Did you dislike Loreda during these years? Did you understand her?

11. "Tony and Rose were the kind of people who expected life to be hard and had become tougher to survive. . . . They might have come off the boat as Anthony and Rosalba, but hard work and the land had turned them into Tony and Rose. Americans. They would die of thirst and hunger before they'd give that up." (76) Do you think this attitude is a common thread in those who across generations have come to chase the "American Dream"? Why is land so important to that dream? How does one "become American"?

12. There is a strong thread running through this novel about man's connection to the land. During the Dust Bowl, while many families went west in search of work and a better life, most of them stayed behind on their parched farms. Why do you think that is?

13. What bonds Loreda and her father? What dreams do they share? Do they intend to exclude Elsa, whom they perceive as just a workhorse? Or is she partially to blame for being ostracized?