Roses by Leila Meacham

Book Club Discussion Questions

1. Early in the story, an elderly Mary Toliver contemplates the changes that have taken place in the community she has lived in all her life: Sassie now refers to dinner as lunch, the Toliver mansion has been outfitted with modern conveniences. Yet the antebellum grace of the avenue remained the same, a small part of the South not yet gone with the wind. How do these surface observations set the tone for the deep traditions and powerful changes that are described throughout the story? What things in your home, community or family have changed over time, and what has stayed the same?

2. When a desperate young Mary tries to find solace in the mother who has seemingly turned her back on both her daughter and her late husband, Darla replies, You ask me what else he could have done. He could have loved me more than he loved his land. That is what he could have done. This is the first of many times that we see bitterness over a loved one choosing Somerset above all else. What do you think it was about the land that was worth so much for so long, until Mary's death?

3. From a young age, Mary is stubborn and headstrong, believing that she knows without a shadow of a doubt what is best for herself, her family, and Somerset. In a heated argument with Percy Warwick, she declares, What none of you can see is that I am honor bound to carry out my father's wishes. I would never marry a man who did not understand and support my feelings for Somerset. What is it besides the confidence of youth that gives Mary such conviction? Have you ever been similarly completely sure of something, only to realize later that you were wrong?

4. Amos Hines, and many others over the years, is shocked and skeptical when he reads of the Toliver curse, that any owner of Somerset will never have more than one heir. Mary was convinced of the curse's reality by the end of her life, but what are other, more credible downsides to owning this particular piece of land? Is the curse truly specific to Tolivers?

5. Mary is positive that Lucy Gentry, despite her devotion to him, could never be the kind of woman that Percy could care for, yet Mary is truly taken by surprise when Percy tells her he plans to marry no one but her. How is it possible that she could have been so perceptive of his desires, and her own, on one count, yet completely blind on another?

6. Lucy insists to her roommate that she can be with Percy, saying, My love for him will blind him. Later she pushes herself into the Warwick household, determined to spend as much time with Percy as possible. Can such relentlessness and aggression work in the realm of love, keeping in mind that Percy uses a similar tactic when he bargains with Mary to test whether they can live without one another? How would you have dealt with such an unwanted visitor in your home if you were Percy's mother?

7. Percy admits to Mary, I want to marry you because I love you. I have loved you all your life, ever since you smiled at me through your cradle bars. I have never considered marrying anyone else. He has taken the concept of love at first sight to a new level. Is it really possible to love someone the way he has, for your entire life?

8. Think about how promises play out in the novel. Rachel's promise to her late father to care for Somerset, Ollie's promise to Mary that he will protect Percy, and Percy's being left with a commission from Mary to keep Somerset out of Rachel's hands are just a few of the pledges that are key to the

story. What others are there? When were they beneficial, and when are they destructive?

9. When Mary complains that Miles has abandoned the Toliver family for Paris, Percy points out that Miles has the same right to his choices as you to do yours. At what point, if ever, does individual happiness come before family obligation? How would Mary, at a young age and at an older age, Percy, Miles, and Rachel each answer that question?

10. Emmitt Waithe is disturbed by Mary's desire to expand her farm with Fair Acres, saying, This is not about vision. This is about blind desire that falls short of greed only because you love the land. It is your pride pushing you to buy Fair Acres. Is he correct? What distinction, if any, is there between Mary's desire to do right by her family and her desire to find satisfaction for herself?

11. Apprehension and fatigue were her constant companions. Worry went to bed with her at night and awoke with her in the morning. Why does Mary keep at this unrelenting, thankless farm work, particularly as Percy spends time with other women? What are her drives, and what are his?

12. Compounding the horror of Darla's suicide are the pink ribbons she left behind, the memory of which writhed between Mary and Percy like a poisonous snake. Roses and the colors pink, red, and white all have major significance in the story. What kind of symbolism do we ascribe to objects and their colors today? Why do you think that those objects that represent emotions are so important and powerful?

13. Throughout the ups and downs of their relationship, Percy is steadfast in his knowledge that they are meant to be together, while Mary, just as certain at every moment, wavers. It was inevitable that she and Percy would clash, steel against steel. This was love, she thought. They would work out their differences. They needed each other. I am Somerset. To separate me from the plantation is to have half of me. I would not be the same. I am convinced of that now. Why is it so difficult for Mary to understand what she knows, only to realize, in the end, that she has made a mistake?

14. Had Mary and Percy married after all, do you think that their relationship would have worked out in the end?