

∞ BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION TOPICS ∞

1. “Little Madhouse on the Prairie” begins by tracing the author’s family back several generations. What cultural conditions described in the book may have led to child abuse? How has parenting changed over the last several generations—or has it?
2. Did you feel sympathy for the Witte family’s hardships? What is the author’s attitude toward her ancestors? Why do you think the author wants readers to know about her grandparents’ lives?
3. As a culture we tend to romanticize farm life. What is the author’s attitude toward life on her family’s farm? Does she describe any positive aspects of being left to roam around the farm unsupervised?
4. The author vividly recounts the moment when she realized that keeping a spotless house was more important to her mother than treating her daughter with love. Do mothers today ever feel pressured to put housekeeping over the needs of their family?
5. Was the author’s brother to blame for his mistreatment of his sister? At what point did her brother shift from protector to tormentor? Do all families have a member who seems to get more than their share of abuse?
6. The author describes how television shows of the 1950s gave her a window onto a very different kind of family life than the one she knew. Discuss what she saw and whether or not you think television might play a similar role in the life of abused children today.
7. Why did no teacher, friend or family member step in to halt the abuse of the author? Were they unable to see the signs or was it completely hidden from view? What is our role in society when we see child abuse? Do we have an obligation to step forward?

8. What finally caused the author to confront her mother and say, more or less, enough is enough? Why doesn't this bring about the end of the author's misery?
9. To what does the author attribute her drive for perfection and achievement in college? Did it bring her happiness?
10. Were you surprised by the author's relationship to alcohol? What in her history led her to take a pledge of sobriety?
11. The author's in-laws provided loving parental role models. She tells a touching story of how her own daughter's smudgy fingerprints were left on her mother-in-law's sliding glass doors for weeks as a precious reminder of the little girl. How does the way in which we were parented influence our own parenting? Can we ever completely reject the voices and values that are drilled into us as children? Have you ever heard yourself say something to your children that was exactly what your mother would have said?
12. The author leaves her seemingly wonderful husband to embark on a journey to heal herself. How did you feel about this unorthodox choice? Respect? Censure? Have you ever had to make a similar choice?
13. Of the many paths the author traveled to heal from abuse, which seemed to have worked the best? Why?
14. As the healing process begins to give the author perspective on her life, do her attitudes towards her mother, father and brother change? Discuss the role that forgiveness plays in her struggle to be whole.
15. The author confronts a woman who is abusing her child at a department store. What action do you think the author hopes people will take as the result of reading "Little Madhouse on the Prairie"? What would you do if you saw a child being abused in public?