

## *Kingdom of Simplicity* Reading Group Guide

1. What is the nature of forgiveness? What is the difference between acceptance and forgiveness? How long “should” it take and what does it take to reach forgiveness? Do you need to know who harmed you in order to forgive? Is it necessary to know exactly what happened (the whole story) in order to forgive? Do you need an apology or acknowledgement of harm in order to forgive? Do you need to forgive yourself before forgiving another? Did each of these characters actually forgive - the mother? Eli? Levi?
2. What is the connection between compassion, humility, and forgiveness? In the Amish community? In our (“English”) society?
3. How is laughter used in this book, in the Amish community? Is it a sign or indication of healing? Forgiveness? What were the times in the story when laughter was a sign of healing? Did Eli avoid laughter because he was afraid of losing his grief? Of distancing himself from his sisters?
4. What is the role of memory in this book? In the Amish culture? Was the role of Eli in this book to be the carrier of memory? How does writing/being the writer serve the role of communal story teller/memory keeper? What are the burdens and the rewards of that responsibility?
5. How does cooking and gardening offer Amish women creative expression that would otherwise go unseen? What is the significance of Eli’s mother’s garden? How does she use it, or not use it, to cope with her grief? The Amish are known for their baked goods. What was the significance of baking pluckets in Eli’s house? In what ways does food play a role in preserving distinct cultural values for new generations?
6. Hair seems to be a theme in the book. What is the significance of hair to the Amish? What is the significance of the mother’s cutting the daughters’ braids? Why did Eli find his mother’s act in cutting his sisters’ hair so frightening and wrong? What was the significance of brushing Emma’s hair? Why does Leroy shave off all of Eli’s hair rather than just give him the haircut he wanted? How did it affect Eli’s plans for *rumspringa*? Did it help or harm Eli in his journey to self-understanding? What about the fact that Eli becomes an expert shaver, specifically of facial hair?
7. Why is Leroy, the person who actually helps Eli the most, an outsider but not considered “English”? What is the difference to the Amish in these distinctions? Why did the Amish trust him and let him in? How did Leroy facilitate Eli’s growth and self-acceptance and help him learn about forgiveness? Why did he use the nickname “Big Ugly”? Did that help or hurt Eli?
8. What do you do when you live in a community with very distinct and defined values and you don’t believe or practice them all? How do you know what rules you can break and what rules you cannot? How can you learn when there is so much silence? Is it possible to have value differences and still live in such a homogenous community?
9. Was Eli motivated by survivor guilt after the accident? What about his father? How does his father deal with the tragedy? In what ways does he understand Eli’s angst and journey? How is ‘hiding’ a pattern that Eli adopts from his father?

10. The book is called Kingdom of Simplicity. The Amish call themselves “Plain People.” What does simplicity really mean to the Amish? Eli’s journey seems to be a quest to understand the complexity of this “simple” culture. In what ways is it simple, and in what ways very complex and somewhat incomprehensible to outsiders, “The English”?

11. The idea of *rumspringa* seems to reflect a great understanding of what adolescents need. What does it accomplish for the Amish? What are the expectations that are placed on kids in *rumspringa* and the limits they are given? To what extent does it provide freedom and to what extent is it very constrained - for Eli? for his sister Hanna? for Levi and his brother Amos? What are the dangers of *rumspringa* - for the community? for the individual teens?

12. Cameras seem to be the focus of a great deal of trauma and in many ways the catalyst for much of what happens in this book. How is it the source of both tragedy and growth for Eli? What is the significance of the Amish belief in ‘graven images’ and photos? What does Eli actually learn about the camera and its power?

13. Grace and divination, though seldom named in the book, play a large role in Eli’s fate. In what ways did Eli get in his own way and prevent grace from happening? What is the ultimate irony in his fate? What is the nature of a true “calling” and why do people often resist receiving it? Is it possible to move toward a higher truth without changing?

14. Discuss the final scene with the tree. What does it mean? How is the scar used as a metaphor? What does it mean for Eli? What has he been able to do?

15. How does the cover image convey the theme of this book? Whose hands are they really? How does the story continue through this image even after the reader finishes the book?

**Recommended reading:**

*Forgive For Good*, by Dr. Fredric Luskin, PhD

*Rumspringa: To Be or Not to Be Amish* by Tom Shachtman

*Amish Grace: How Forgiveness Transcended Tragedy* by Donald B. Kraybill, Steven M. Nolt, David L. Weaver-Zercher

*The Riddle of Amish Culture* by Donald B. Kraybill

*A History of the Amish* by Steven M. Nolt

*Amish Society* by John A. Hostetler