

READING GROUP GUIDE

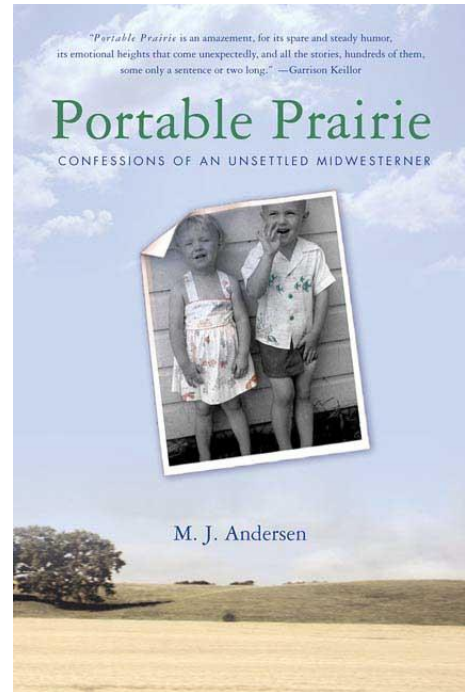
Portable Prairie

Confessions of an Unsettled Midwesterner

By M. J. Andersen

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Portable Prairie* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Portable Prairie*.

About the Book

In a moving and bittersweet story, M.J. Andersen chronicles her childhood and adolescence in South Dakota, her departure to forge her own life, and her persistent longing for the landscape she left behind. Her hometown, given the fictional name of Plainville, is so quiet that one local family regularly parks by the tracks to watch the train pass through. Yet small-town life and, especially, the prairie prove to be fertile ground for Andersen's imagination. Exploring subjects as seemingly unrelated as Roy Rogers and Tolstoy's beloved Anna Karenina, she repeatedly locates a transcendent connection with South Dakota's broad horizon.

Andersen introduces us to her hardworking newspaper family, which produces one of Plainville's two competing weeklies; to Job's Daughters, a Christian association intended to prepare young women for adversity (Plainville's chapter assumes the added responsibility of throwing the town's best teen dances); and even to a local variety of hardy alfalfa, to which her best friend has a surprising kinship.



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Leaving behind her physical home, Andersen travels East for college, remaining to begin a journalism career. With her husband she eventually settles into her first house, a beautiful Victorian that, though loved, somehow does not feel like home in the way she had anticipated. Through subsequent travels, memories, and a meditation on Tolstoy's complex relationship to his ancestral home, she arrives at a new idea of what home is -- one that should resonate with every American who has ever had to pull up stakes.

About the Author

M.J. Andersen grew up in South Dakota and now lives in Massachusetts with her husband. She is a graduate of Princeton University and holds a master's degree from Brown University. A recent fellow in the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, she writes for the editorial pages of the *Providence Journal*.

Discussion Questions

1. The author's quest for home revolves around her childhood landscape. How important is landscape to a sense of home?
2. What is the significance of the stained glass window? Why does the author resist installing it in her new home?
3. By taking on the harsh conditions in the Dakotas, the agriculturalist Niels Hansen helped shape the region's identity. How much does the author's sense of self derive from this identity? In what other ways do Americans define themselves?
4. Throughout the book, horses are emblems of imaginative power. What does it mean when the author thinks she can no longer hear her toy horses whinnying from their shoebox? Does anything take their place later on?
5. A trip to California plunges the author's family into a watershed historical moment, the Watts riots of 1965. Do children generally dwell outside history? How and when does the author's historical consciousness dawn?
6. In Denmark, the author feels a sense of belonging. Yet she is wary of identifying too strongly with the group. Why?
7. Plainville gives the author a sense of community that eludes her in Eastboro. Are newcomers to a community destined to remain outsiders?



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8. Roy Rogers is among the book's important male characters. How do the male personalities compare with its female personalities? How does sexual identity affect the author's feelings of being at home in the world?
9. Tolstoy's search for meaning becomes intensely bound up in Christianity. How does the author's quest diverge from his? What part does belief play in her idea of home?
10. How has the author's idea of home changed by the end of the book?

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