1. The novel’s title, *The First Book of Calamity Leek*, emphasizes Calamity’s role in shaping her own story. How much agency do you think she has? What is the significance of reading and writing in her life?

2. How reliable are any of us as narrators of our own experience? How are Calamity and Aunty similar and different as narrators? How important is the reader in shaping the narrative?

3. In many ways, this is a coming-of-age story. How does Calamity change over the course of the novel? How does she stay the same? What about her sisters?

4. Discuss Calamity’s views on love: “I loved the Garden and my second-wind sisters, and look what went happening to them…See, love ain’t an overnight sprouting the moment a body sees a new rat. No, love needs to be sowed deep, composted regular and kept blight-free for a hope of it to bud. It needs soil and fresh air, and it needs watching over by Aunty. And happen in this white-walled place, well, that just ain’t possible, is it? And if Aunty ain’t here that ain’t possible neither. So I reckon on not bothering with it no more.” How does love manifest itself in this novel?

5. How is humor used within the novel? Would you consider this to be a funny book? Why or why not?

6. Aunty tells Calamity: “It’s the most precious thing in the world—a happy childhood. And when you come to look back on it, Calamity dearest, I think you’ll know just how happy yours has been.” Do you think there is happiness in the Garden? How do the various sisters find joy in their lives?

7. The relationships in the Garden are described in familial terms: sister, daughter, mother, aunty. What does the novel suggest about the nature of family and friendship? How does Calamity’s introduction to the Waverleys complicate that?

8. Do you think Aunty is at all sympathetic? Did her final letter to Calamity change how you felt about her?
9. Would you describe this as a feminist novel? What does Calamity’s story have to say about power dynamics between men and women, and women and women? How do the various characters obtain and demonstrate power?

10. Despite their nearly identical upbringings, each of the sisters has a clearly defined personality and worldview. What do the differences between them, particularly between Calamity and Annie, suggest about agency and freewill? Which do you consider the heroine of the story? Does their “likability” factor into that?

11. In the hospital, Calamity describes Dorothy’s “‘Book of Questions,’ which Annie says is Dorothy’s very own Appendix on how things are for real.” What does this novel suggest about the nature of reality? Is the Outside more “for real” than the Garden?

12. Discuss the roles of musical theater and fairytales in the novel. How does Calamity’s story fit within and transcend those narrative structures?

13. Like the Bible, The First Book of Calamity Leek begins in a Garden, with a fall. How is the quest for knowledge, and the consequences of that quest, treated in each account?

14. What does the extreme example of the Garden suggest about belief systems in general? Are we any freer than the Garden girls?

15. What do you make of the novel’s end? Do you think Calamity’s future seems hopeful?