



# Reading Group Gold

## I Will Send Rain

Rae Meadows

The year is 1934, the town, Mulehead, Oklahoma. Annie Bell stands at the kitchen sink and watches dark clouds roll in from the horizon. After seventy-three bone-dry days, the worst drought the Great Plains has ever seen, rain. At last. But the relief and gratitude that send Annie running are short lived; this storm will prove even more devastating and demanding than the parched weather that preceded it. *I Will Send Rain*—inspired by a Dorothea Lange photograph, “with echoes of Faulkner and Steinbeck”<sup>\*</sup>—is the visceral and resonant story of a family struggling to survive in the 1930s Oklahoma Dust Bowl.

From its first page, *I Will Send Rain* is a novel you feel, as the family at its center—and more broadly, their town—comes undone by the relentless waves of grit and dust that marked the Dust Bowl years. In the Bells, Meadows delivers an uncommon family

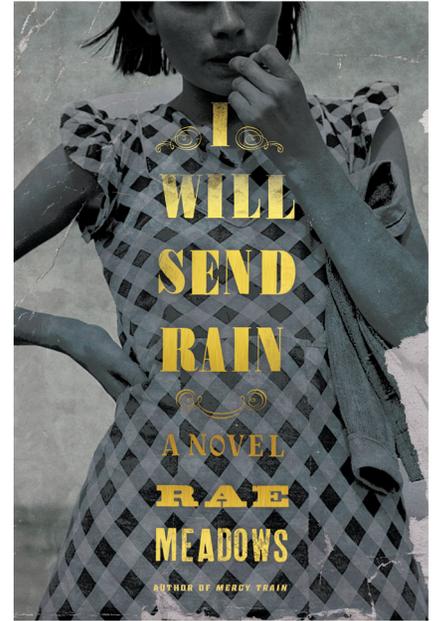
portrait. Untethered by daily drought and storms that leave layers of dirt on counters, pies, in hair, eyes, and throats, each in the family harbors a secret dream of escape: through a first love, through faith, by way of a far-away city and a man who will take you there. And for Fred, the youngest Bell, in a rich world of his own creation. Neighbors leave, secrets accrue, and finally tragedy strikes, leaving the Bells fighting for their footing, fumbling for mercy and meaning in the face of the incomprehensible.

In Meadows’s singularly gifted hands, this novel sings. *I Will Send Rain* is a piercing story of motherhood and family, resilience, longing, fierce love, and, in the end, hope. It’s a story that will stay with you long after you turn the last page.

<sup>\*</sup>Oprah.com

### Discussion Questions

1. *I Will Send Rain* is an unusually visceral novel, one the reader feels very specifically, along with its characters. Why is this important? How does the physical world in which the Bells struggle reveal their character? Is “place” generally important to you in a novel?
2. It’s difficult to imagine making the decision the Bells make, to stay and face unyielding drought and massive rolling dust storms. What is it that makes them stay? Stubbornness or denial? Fear, optimism, fatalism? Or something else? Would you stay, or leave the life you’ve built behind?
3. “Connection to the land”—a concept familiar in the early part of the twentieth century, less so now—explains, in part, why the Bells don’t leave when the dust comes. What does it mean to you to be connected to the land? Is it something you sympathize with in this story? Would it be enough for you to stay?



ISBN: 978-1-6277-9426-8



# Reading Group Gold

4. While Meadows narrates the bulk of her story from Annie's perspective, we also see through Samuel's, Birdie's, and Fred's eyes. How does this narrative choice enrich and further the story?
5. A key theme in *I Will Send Rain* is what it means to be a mother. What does it mean for Annie Bell, a woman trying to keep her family together when all she's known has dried up and blown away? What does it mean for you? Would it shift if the life you now know were to change so dramatically?
6. Meadows asks the Bells to find meaning in the incomprehensible. How does this inform her story, and how does the quest for meaning define her characters? What do they gain and lose? What do they take from one another?
7. Each of the Bells harbors a secret dream of escape: for Annie, an illicit relationship; for Samuel, religious faith; for Birdie, a first love with a local boy; for Fred, a complex internal world. What do these modes of escape teach you about these characters?
8. To some readers, Samuel comes across as the character least connected to reality—and within the story, becomes the object of public ridicule—as he pursues an unusual spiritual path. What do you think of his mission—does he believe his visions, or is he looking for a sense of purpose? What do you think Meadows intended to convey through the larger religious threads woven throughout the narrative?
9. One could argue that Fred is both the most detached and the most present of the Bells; though a child, he sees much with great clarity. How does this advance the storyline? How does it illuminate the rest of the characters? In what ways, large and small, is he an emotional catalyst within the novel?
10. Why do you think Meadows chose to render Fred as mute?
11. Annie entertains a choice that will destroy the fragile bonds holding her family together. Is it with the hope of escape, or rebellion against a God she's lost faith in? Do you sympathize with her, or find fault? Do you like Annie Bell—and if not, can you at least understand her? At the story's end, in the wake of unthinkable tragedy and loss, she makes a different choice. Would you have made the same decision?
12. What role has duty played (or not) in the choices Annie's made throughout her life? Does it play a role in the choice she makes at the novel's end?
13. Consider the novel's overarching themes of family and love, faith and resilience and hope. How are they explored here? Is the story, in the end, a hopeful one?
14. Critics have compared *I Will Send Rain* to Faulkner and Steinbeck, among others. Do you agree? In what ways are they similar, or not?