



## Little Heathens

By Mildred Armstrong Kalish

### Book Discussion Reader's Guide

#### ***I. Summary of the Book***

***Little Heathens*** is the story of my childhood growing up in rural Iowa during the Great Depression. The book details the remarkable challenges and the inestimable rewards of living a rural life where children were expected to accept responsibilities beyond the ordinary.

My siblings and I were raised on a working farm by aging grandparents with Puritan values and the Protestant work ethic, while our somewhat different and indifferent mother did her insufficient best to rear us. I describe how, beginning in the 1930's, the United States was sliding slowly but surely into the Great Depression — something that frightened us kids almost as much as it did the adults.

Our farm had no running water, no central heat, and no electricity. Above all, we had no money. As a result, the children had to work side-by-side with the grownups. My three siblings and I — along with our cousins who lived on a farm directly across the road — had a part in practically every aspect of making the family and the farm a successful operation. My book relates how we lived and learned in that very challenging world. My story is also a how-to manual — how to scrub a pig's head in preparation for making head-cheese, how to tame a raccoon, how to plant potatoes, and how to wean a calf. ***Little Heathens*** details the remarkable challenges and the inestimable rewards of living a rural life where children were expected to accept responsibilities beyond the ordinary.

#### ***II. About Me***

I was born on St. Patrick's Day in 1922, on a farm near Garrison, Iowa, in Benton County. I graduated from the State University of Iowa on the G. I. Bill. My husband and I have two sons, two daughters-in-law, four grandchildren and a new great grandbaby girl. I have taught at the State University of Iowa at Iowa City, the State University of Missouri at Columbia, and at

Adelphi University in Garden City, NY. I am a Professor Emeritus of English, retired from Suffolk County Community College on Long Island.

My husband and I are residents of a retirement community in Cupertino, California.

### **III. Discussion Questions**

#### **Icebreaker**

Is there a memorable family story that gets told time and again when you gather together, for example, at holidays or reunions? Can you share it briefly with the group? (Note: It can be inspirational or sad or funny or all three.)

#### **Question 1**

These days we are re-learning how to be "green" and take care of the earth — whether we are recycling or composting. But Millie's farm family did this all the time. What are some of the ways in which the family knowingly or even unknowingly practiced conservation?

#### **Question 2**

From Chapter 8, *Thrift*

*"We were taught that if you bought something it should last forever—or as close to forever as we could contrive. I think one of the cleverest tricks was how we extended the lives of socks. When the socks of the biggest child developed holes in the toes, Grandma, using her dressmaker's shears, would cut off the end, sew it closed on the sewing machine, and pass the socks down to the child next in size. When the socks developed holes again, she would repeat this until the sock had been passed down to the child with the smallest foot. You think that was the end of those socks? "Not on your tintype!" as she would have put it. She cut the ribbed tops off of those socks and they did duty sewn into the ends of sleeves of fall and winter jackets and coats to keep out the bitter cold.*

*"Of course, there were times when the socks developed holes in the heels. This repair called for painstaking darning, always done by females and nearly always done during their so-called leisure time. But there was a limit to how often socks could be darned, and when they had been "all darned out" we were resourceful to the end. We cut them into small squares and tossed them into the shoe-shine box to be used for buffing cloths. Or we cut them lengthwise into two-inch widths and clamped them into the reusable mop handle designed for this purpose. We used a dry mop made of woolen socks for dusting and a wet mop of cotton ones for washing floors."*

What was your reaction to this description of how every part of the sock was used. Did you feel sorry for the family or did you admire them for this thrift? Now that you know how each part of the sock was used, would you ever consider doing this yourself? Do you have any household thrifty tips that you would like to share with the group?

#### **Question 3**

What kinds of things did the children do for fun? Could you see yourself or your family enjoying these kinds of activities today? In what ways was Millie's childhood like or unlike your childhood, or the lives of children today?

**Question 4**

What did you think of the family's diet? Do you wish you could eat as they did? Or are you glad that you don't? What new things did you learn about how food is grown or raised or prepared?

**Question 5**

The family had a cemetery that they tended and visited regularly. Did you admire them for doing this or did you think it was morbid? How, if at all, has the American way of honoring the dead changed over time?

**Question 6**

The Armstrong children were raised by both their mother and their grandparents. Describe their different approaches to child rearing.

**Question 7**

What insecurities did Millie have growing up? Who were the people who contributed to those insecurities? And who were the people who helped her to overcome them? Throughout all of the heavy work, cold winters, and family troubles, Millie maintains a 'sunny' disposition. Do you think her character was created by her experiences on the farm, or was something she was born with?

**Question 8**

Because this is a family memoir of events that took place years ago, conversations could not be recorded exactly and there are more impressions than footnoted facts. Did the impressions appear reliable to you? In other words did you trust Millie as a narrator? Why or why not?

**Question 9**

At the end of the book, Millie has to make a decision about whether to continue working as a companion to a wealthy woman who has befriended her or to strike out on her own. Were you surprised at Millie's decision to join the Coast Guard? Why or why not?

**Question 10**

Millie's father disappears early in the story, and is never heard from again. Did you wonder why he disappeared? Were there any other family mysteries that you wanted to know more about? What, if anything, do you think she left out of the story?

**Final Question**

During the 1930s, the only ways that families could record their memories was through diaries, letters, black and white photographs, drawings and sketches, and in rare cases, through a published book. Today we have so many more multimedia choices. If you were preparing a record of your family history for personal use, or widespread distribution, what forms of media would you use and why? Are you concerned about the ability of future generations to access our electronic media? Do you have family records on obsolete media (e.g. Super8 movies, BetaMax tapes, 8 track tapes)?

***IV. Additional Material***

Bill Bryson has written a book about growing up in Iowa during the 1940's and 1950's (*The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*). Some clubs may wish to read both books and compare how American rural life changed during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## ***V. A recipe to share at the meeting***

From Chapter 11, *Farm Food*

Grandma's Apple Cream Pie

Here's how to make crust for two large one-crust pies.

3 cups all-purpose flour  
3/4 cup vegetable oil  
1 1/2 teaspoons salt  
3/8 cup skim or whole milk

Blend all together with a fork, and form into two equal balls using your hands. Roll out between two sheets of wax paper. Peel the top paper off the dough using a spatula. With the paper side up, carefully fit the crust into the pie pan. Now carefully remove the wax paper. If the crust tears, don't worry. Using your fingers, carefully paste over the hole. Take care not to stretch the dough. Unlike the old-fashioned lard dough, you can handle this mixture as much as you like. You will probably never make the old-fashioned dough again.

Note: the following recipe for pie filling is for one ten-inch pie; if you want to make two pies, double it.

3/4 c sugar + 1 tbsp  
1/2 tsp salt  
3 tbsp flour  
6 Granny Smith apples  
1/2 pt heavy cream  
cinnamon

Preheat oven to 450° . Combine three quarters of a cup of sugar with three tablespoons flour and one half teaspoon salt. Stir. Add three tablespoons of this mixture to the dough-lined pie pan, and pat it gently but firmly into the crust with the opened palm of your hand. This little trick promises a crisp undercrust when baked. Set aside the remainder of the sugar mixture.

Peel, core, and cut into eighths six Granny Smith apples. Add two tablespoons of lemon juice if the apples are not tart enough. Arrange apples in the crust, sprinkle with the remainder of the sugar-flour mixture, and dust liberally with cinnamon. Pour a half pint of heavy cream over all and sprinkle one tablespoon of sugar on top of this wonderful creation. Place in 450° oven for twelve minutes, then reduce the heat to 350° and bake about one hour or until the apples are done. You should test for doneness with a toothpick—or a straw drawn from the kitchen broom if you are as indifferent to the dangers of germs as we were.