

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE WORST HARD TIME BY TIMOTHY EGAN

1. Discuss what Egan presents as the reasons for the dust bowl tragedy. Was it a confluence of unforeseen events that produced the perfect storm? Or was it a man-made disaster that might have been avoided, or at least mitigated?
2. Should everyone have known better—was there enough known at the time about the impact of farming techniques on erosion?
3. Who tried to warn about the dangers of farming in the grasslands? What were the gist of their warnings? Why were they ignored? Is it simply human nature to take heed in hindsight rather than in real time?
4. Talk about the different characters in Egan's story. Which of the families' stories do you find particularly poignant? Which characters do you find most admirable?
5. What descriptions of the dust storms did you find most shocking or most tragic—Black Sunday, static electricity, dust pneumonia, just to name a few?
6. During the disaster, 250 million people left their homes—a diaspora about which Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* is written. But most residents stayed. What made them stay? Would it have been better to have left? Which choice would you have made?
7. What was the political outfall of the dust bowl? How did Washington eventually respond? What have been the lasting effects?
8. What lessons, if any, have we learned from the dust bowl catastrophe—about how human actions, well-intentioned or not, can lead to environmental damage? Is there anything comparable on the horizon today?
9. "Surviving the Dust Bowl," a 2007 documentary, part of the *American Experience* series on PBS, would make a valuable contribution to any book club discussion. The film footage is stunning. You could get a copy through your public library or through Netflix.
10. You might also pair this work with Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* and discuss the human tragedies—and bravery—in both accounts.

Questions by LitLovers.



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