

THE GREAT ALONE READERS' GUIDE

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Before reading the book, what was your perception of life in Alaska? What surprised you?
2. “The wild, spectacular beauty of Alaska. It was otherworldly somehow, magical in its vast expanse, an incomparable landscape of soaring glacier-filled white mountains that ran the length of the horizon, knife-tip points pressed high into a cloudless, cornflower blue sky.” (31) The author describes the Alaskan landscape with such electric language—what passages did you find the most moving? Did they help you visualize the place or inspire you? Did you find the landscape to be in contrast to the violence of the story? Or do you think it complemented the breathtaking feeling of young love?
3. What aspects of the lifestyle would you find the most challenging in the wild? How would you handle the isolation, the interdependence among neighbors, the climate? Would you have what it takes to survive?
4. “Up here, there’s no one to tell you what to do or how to do it. We each survive our own way. If you’re tough enough, it’s Heaven on Earth.” (49) What drives the settlers in *The Great Alone* to Alaska? They’re not all desperate people in desperate need of a fresh start like the Allbrights, but what could be attractive about this unique way of life for some? What brings Large Marge there, and the Walker family? Do you think most are hunting for something—or hiding?
5. In *The Great Alone*, we’re transported by the author back to America in the early ’70s with plot elements such as the gas shortage, shocking news headlines, counter-cultural ideas, and of course, the wardrobe choices. If you were present for these years, what was it like to see snapshots of it in the story? Did it match up with your memories, or color the story for you? What would you add?
6. Did you find Cora’s actions and “liberated” mind-set to be in conflict? When we first meet Cora she’s venting about discriminatory credit practices at the bank while sipping from a feminist-messaged coffee cup, but we soon discover she’s at a tense crossroads in her personal life. What do you think holds her back?
7. Leni sees the complexity of her parents’ relationship when in such close quarters with them in the cabin—the rawness of their lives together. Did you think it was going to be the weather or the violence that killed them first?
8. Discuss the forms of love within this book—crazy and romantic love, neighborly love and compassion, love for the natural world, and a mother’s love. What else would you add?
9. “Your mother was a kite string. Without her strong, steady hold on you, you might just float away, be lost somewhere among the clouds.” (126) If you have faced the loss of a loved one, did you find this quote to have special resonance for you? What did the author get right about this sentiment? How else would you describe a mother’s influence? Does Cora serve such a role for Leni—why and why not? Did your ideas change throughout the book?
10. Leni and Matthew compare their friendship with Sam and Frodo’s from *The Lord of the Rings*, but what other couples from literature do you think they’d fit neatly into the roles of?
11. “This is dangerous, she thought again, but she couldn’t make herself care. All she could think about now was Matthew, and how it had felt when he kissed her, and how much she wanted to kiss him again.” (241) Do you recall your own days of young love and that rush of feeling? Do you think the experience is universal?
12. How did the building of Ernt’s wall affect you as a reader? Did you find that the construction heightened the suspense—or was it suffocating?
13. Did you see Cora’s explosive act of protection coming? What did it feel like to read that scene? As a parent, do you think you’d be capable of the same act, or be able to write such a confessional letter?
14. Did you hold Leni responsible in your mind for any of Matthew’s misfortune? Why or why not? How does Leni show her devotion in the end? Did you anticipate the kind of future that is set in motion for them at the close of the book?
15. At the end of the story, Leni ends up back in Alaska—do you think there’s an ultimate place where people belong? How would you know if you got there?

