

## ***Discussion Questions***

1. *The Virgin of Small Plains* intertwines various perspectives across two different time periods. Do you find the action easy to follow, or does this approach require some adjustment on your part?
2. *The Virgin of Small Plains* conflates several genres: It's a murder mystery, a literary novel, and a ghost story with inflections of magical realism. How would you classify the book? How does the novel adhere to and/or deviate from the conventions of crime fiction? The conventions of literary fiction?
3. None of the protagonists are wholly virtuous: Mitch abandoned Abby; Abby remains bitter and angry; Rex, who twice finds himself playing confidant to women in love with his best friend, suffers from jealousy. With whom do you sympathize most?
4. Certain characters, such as the judge, are demonstrably culpable here; but the story also implicates others, like Nadine and her husband's friends. Of what are the judge's wife, Doc Reynolds, and Sheriff Shellenberger guilty? Why do they aid Judge Newquist in the first place, and how, if at all, do they rationalize their actions?
5. Why did Mitch keep silent for seventeen years? Whom was he trying to protect—or hurt—with his absence? Do you feel he was doing the right thing?
6. Before he disappears from Small Plains, Mitch notes that everyone in his family deceives one another, while Abbey decides she doesn't feel any guilt about lying to her mother—lies "made it possible to live life without feeling totally chained down to other people's expectations." What sort of lies, if any, might be considered acceptable, in both the novel and real life? Is a lie of omission just as bad as any other sort of lie?
7. Are we meant to believe that some divine or supernatural mechanism is operating within the action? Are we meant to believe otherwise? How do you interpret certain possibly magical events in the novel, like the tornado, Carrie's brief convalescence, and the fatal car crash near the end?
8. One of the book's central themes is the idea that communities prefer fear and secrecy to painful truths. Does this relate to current social or political climates? How?
9. Another key them is the insistence of the past upon the present. Is it possible for some truths to remain forever buried? Can a hidden truth still exert an insidious tow, as is the case in *The Virgin of Small Plains*?
10. The novel deals in depth with innocence and its loss. What are some instances of this? Who is innocent, and whose innocence is lost or taken?
11. We only fleetingly meet Sarah, but she indelibly impacts every major character in the novel. Have you in your life ever known anyone who likewise influenced you after just a brief meeting?
12. The residents of Small Plains (and, soon enough, people from around the country) come to believe in the divine power of the Virgin. Do you know of any similar stories or lore from your own community?