

Discussion questions for "The Year We Left Home"

1. What or where is the "home" referenced in the book's title?
2. Why does Janine desert Ryan midway through their trip to Colorado? How and why do you resonate with Janine's and/or with Ryan's experience during the stay at the Ericson family home?
3. Ryan reflects again and again on what he calls "the Great State of Alienation" (page 116, 215). Many, if not all, the book's characters experience alienation, albeit in difference ways and different degrees. Discuss.
4. "Anita had known that when it came to marrying, something remarkable was expected of her. It was a small town, and girls like her were burdened with everyone's admiration and spite." (page 134) Do you think this is an accurate depiction of a beautiful girl's burden in 1970's small town Iowa? Why or why not? How does Anita come to terms with a life that does not live up to her expectations?
5. Her mother said to Anita, "It used to be good enough if you kept a clean house and did right by your children and now you're supposed to go out and be some kind of world-beater." (page 80) How does a mother know if she has done right by her children?
6. Talk about what Ryan discovers about himself on his family trip to Italy. Ryan reflects, at a wedding reception in Italy, that weddings are "more alike than different. The strain of so much public happiness. The promises everyone is expected to keep." (page 280) Do you agree or disagree with Ryan? Do you think that this is meant to be Ryan's opinion or the view conveyed by the novel? Why?
7. Blake is the Ericson son who never left his hometown. Thompson finally shares Blake's perspective on page 250. Why does the author delay so long in letting us hear Blake speak? How does Blake's chapter affect your understanding of the Ericson family dynamics?
8. Chip, as a character, makes the reader feel uneasy, uncomfortable. How does Thompson accomplish this?
9. Are you a "leaver" or a "stayer"? Which Erickson child do you feel you are most like? Which character would you choose for a friend?
10. Which Erickson Child was the most successful? Who was the happiest?
11. Chip has special insight into Torrie's struggles. Chip understands "you didn't give up wanting things because your life had put them out of reach. Even if everybody else tried to make you into some kind of crippled saint." (page 291) In what ways is this true for Torrie, for Chip, and for other characters in the novel?
12. One of the characters observes, "We never grew up." Is this a characteristic of Baby Boomers? How will their children be different?
13. In this story alcohol damages individuals and families, and meth and other illegal substances are portrayed as threats to the fabric of small town life. What role does substance abuse play in the decline of rural communities?
14. Ryan asks his history students a question which is a major concern of the novel: "How did it happen that some people lived unquestioning lives, never doubted their place in that enterprise called America, their proprietary involvement, their stake in its successes, while others turned away?" (page 116) How would you answer him? How is this question explored in *The Year We Left Home*?
15. In the book *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What It Means to America* by Carr and Kefalas, the theory is presented that Iowans measure the success of their young people by how far they move from their hometown. Discuss what evidence you have seen of this in rural Iowa communities.

16. The Peerson family, whom Ryan thinks of as “part of some grim, old-country past that laid claim to him without his consent” (page 3-4), is not fleshed out in great detail in *The Year We Left Home*, and yet they appear and are referenced many times during the course of the book. Talk about the Peersons and their place in Thompson’s novel. Talk about the “Peerson equivalent” in your own life and history.
17. Thompson is a master at using satire and humor (“Another family, another loan officer, all dead. The farmers were always good shots.” page 140). How does humor and satire affect the tone of the book? Cite some of your favorite examples.
18. Talk about how Iowa, and rural life in general, is poked fun at in the novel. Are scenes such as the American Legion Hall wedding reception, the farm foreclosure auction, the visit to Aunt Martha authentic? How do they figure in to the fabric of the novel? Talk about similar scenes that are important to the story of your own life.
19. Ryan reflects at the end of the book (in the 2003 chapter) “There had been seven fat years and now there were seven lean ones, all this with the country gone into an ugly, shaky tailspin . . .” (page 314) How has the state of our country changed over the past decade?
20. Is the novel’s ending happy or sad? What ending would you have chosen?