

THIS HIDDEN THING by Dora Dueck
Book discussion resource for Book Clubs

1. How would you describe Maria as she is first presented to us? What importance does “working out” have for her? How much does her personality change as her life progresses?
2. Think about the process of learning a second language. How does Maria manage it?
3. What makes Edith Lowry decide to accept Peter’s proposal and employ Maria as a domestic? What are the issues and complications that arise from Maria’s presence in the Lowry household (for her, and for the Lowry family)?
4. Over the course of the novel, Maria encounters a number of different relationship models. How do these influence her?
5. Letter-writing is an important practice for Maria. Is it a way of communicating with her loved ones or a way of exploring her own thoughts and feelings – or both? How do hymns, prayers, and scripture passages function in this novel? Why are they so important for Maria?
6. The first half of the novel centres on the Lowry house in Winnipeg. How does Maria’s time with her family in Winkler and the visits to the cottage at Victoria Beach compare to the scenes in Winnipeg?
7. At the Mary-Martha House Maria finds an important group of friends. How does Anni, in particular, leave an impact on Maria’s life and the way she sees herself as a Mennonite domestic?
8. How does the reader react to James Edward? Do we read him differently than Maria does?
9. What is Maria’s first impression of Gladys and Martin? How does she view their childlessness? How does this change as Maria comes to know them more intimately?
10. Smoking is a habit for the more unconventional characters like Wilhelm and Peter. Where else in the novel do we see tension produced by the “in the world, but not of it” stance of the Mennonites?
11. How does Mrs Lowry change over the years? What do she and Maria hope to gain from their meetings? What about Maria’s relationship with Raymond: what is it like? Are there aspects of Maria’s meetings with Raymond that are surprising?
12. Winnipeg poet Sarah Klassen has said this about *This Hidden Thing*: “Beautifully and intelligently written, the story transcends its Mennonite particulars to shed light on the universal and

timeless struggles of the human spirit.” Discuss the connection between “Mennonite particulars” and “universal struggles.”

13. Comment on the following assessment of this novel, by American poet Ann Hostetler:

This sweeping novel covers three generations of Canadian Mennonite history, focused through a young Russian Mennonite immigrant woman whose life is irrevocably changed by her “working out” in Winnipeg to support her family. As an accurate and vivid evocation of time and place, *This Hidden Thing* not only reflects Mennonite cultural change, but also records cultural change among English immigrants to Canada as their lives intersect with Mennonites. But above all, this is a novel of character.

Dora Dueck’s articulation of the reflexes of personality and the development of consciousness creates a drama of emotional tension and continuous discovery as she tells a compelling woman’s story too often obscured by history. She inhabits her characters in such a way that the reader is drawn into a living, breathing world that lingers even after the covers of the book are closed. *This Hidden Thing* offers a worthy female, urban counterpart to Rudy Wiebe’s *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.