

***Hidden Places* Discussion Questions**

The book is set almost entirely in the lands surrounding Wyatt Orchards. Give your impressions of this place. Discuss the dichotomy between the beauty of the land and the harshness of the lives of those who live there. Think about the types of work done to the trees in the orchard and the spiritual way God uses these methods in the characters' lives.

Extra: Compare and contrast the role of the orchard in this novel with the orchards used by Chekhov in *The Cherry Orchard* and John Irving in *The Cider House Rules*.

The title alludes to the secrets that each character first keeps and then reveals throughout the book. In what way were these "hidden places" harming the characters? Where were there any secrets better left unconfessed?

The relationships between parents and children, particularly those between fathers and sons, rest at the heart of this novel. Compare the four fathers (Frank Wyatt, Mr. Fowler, Mr. Willis, and Henri Gerard) in the novel. Who wreaked the most damage on their children? Who was the best father? Why are these relationships at the core of the book...and how did they affect their children's relationship with our Holy Father?

In keeping with the relationships between fathers and sons, the lives of the characters often seemed to reflect or draw upon biblical sources. Examine the stories of Jacob/Joseph, the Prodigal Son, and Leah/Jacob/Laban and their parallels to the events of the book.

Angels, either by their presence or absence, fill the book. Are there any angels in *Hidden Places*? Look at Gabriel/Matthew's first words upon arriving at Wyatt's Orchard and then upon his return later in the book. Discuss their significance in relation to the annunciations often made by angels in the Bible. What is an angel and why are humans sometimes called on to entertain them?

Storytelling and writing are also integral to this book. Two of the characters, Betty and Gabe, are writers. Compare and contrast the role of writing in their lives—including their inspiration, calling, and fulfillment. Why did Betty keep her novels a secret from her family?

Thoreau's *Walden Pond* comes up in the first meeting between Betty and Walter. Look at their favorite lines (p. 135) and discuss how they reflect the personalities and outlooks of each character. Later, another quote (p. 148) challenges the reader to "step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away."

What "music" does each of these characters hear? Who does the best at stepping to that music—i.e. following the course of their lives? Is there such a thing as the Thoreauvian notion of "identity" as believed by the characters? Do we all have one single thing (be it writing, math, etc.) to which we are called?

Another parallel link in the story is that of "stolen" identity. What causes Gabriel and Eliza to form a life of lies?

Extra: Compare/contrast Gabriel's actions with the legend/story of Martin Guerre. (i.e. *The Return of Martin Guerre*, *Sommersby*, etc.)

One of the darker but undeniable aspects of the book is the abuse felt by many of the characters. What are the different kinds of abuse seen? In what different ways do the characters react? Obviously we know that abuse devastates homes, but what effect can it have on a person's spirit? How is abuse conquered in the book—or is it just buried when those who practice it die?

Whose faith in the book is strongest? What do we do with Christians like Frank Wyatt? What spiritual lessons were learned by Eliza? By Gabriel? By Betty?

Finally, *Hidden Places* is also a celebration of family. Though most of the families in the book are deeply scarred, the book acknowledges the true power that God bestows in the family. Why is Eliza able to overlook that love/blessing when she flees the circus? What are the keys to successful family?