

## Discussion Questions for *Life, and Death, and Giants*

Reading is an important activity in this novel, beginning when Hannah Fisher discovers the tattered book of Emily Dickinson poems hidden in her mother's storage chest. What does Hannah read at various points in the narrative, and how does this reading gradually influence her view of the world?

Animals appear throughout the novel, sometimes as a constant presence in the lives of some of the characters. Certainly, one would expect this in the chapters focused on Thomas Kennedy, the veterinarian. But animals are also important to many of the others, especially Mel and Birdy, Gabriel, and other Amish characters. How does this presence of animals—both wild and domesticated—contribute to the overall theme of the novel?

One obvious contrast in the book is between the self-denying anonymity and humility treasured by the Amish characters and the fame and popularity that comes to Gabriel when his athletic accomplishments are beamed around the world on the internet. How are these characteristics reflected and/or judged by the other characters?

There are other dualities present in the novel as well: faith vs agnosticism; rural vs urban life; a provincial view of the world vs a more cosmopolitan view. How are these tensions dramatized, and what conclusions do the characters reach, if any, about the value and limitations of each?

The sports of baseball and football become important in the narrative as Gabriel grows up, and two of the narrators, Billy Walton and Trey Beathard, carry a deep love for those activities. What does their love of sports bring to the narrative, and does that love change at all in the course of the story (and if so, in what ways)?

Fiction writing teachers often say that when it comes to creating fictional characters, where you are is who you are. In other words, place—a novel's setting—is crucial to understanding the people who live there. In what ways is this novel's setting, the fictional backwater of Lakota, Wisconsin, important to the story's development?

The relationships and marriages of the primary characters--and the joys, hardships, and failures of those relationships--is another thread woven through the novel. What is the novel's view of the role of romantic relationships within the wider fabric of human life?

Though most obvious in the character of Absalom Yoder, evil, and spasms of human cruelty, are present at various points in the story. How do the different characters understand the evil and/or hardship that alters their lives?

Though the novel's primary focus is on Gabriel Fisher, it is also an ensemble story, narrated by multiple characters, all of whom also have their own narrative arcs. One way to consider this is to think of Gabriel as the sun, and the other primary characters as planets circling him. A simpler way to think about this is by invoking the dictum that the secret theme of all literature is *change*. How do their interactions with Gabriel's extraordinary life and death change the other characters in the book?