This book, written by the editor of the Library of America edition of the Little House books, is a thoroughly researched biography of not only Laura Ingalls Wilder, but of her daughter, Rose. Using unpublished manuscripts, letters, financial records, and more, Fraser gives fresh insight into the life of a woman beloved to many.


Questions for Discussion

1. Thanks to the Little House books, Laura Ingalls Wilder's childhood is one of the most legendary in our literature. Discuss how the factual account of Laura Ingalls’s real childhood in Prairie Fires differs from fiction. How does an understanding of Wilder’s life affect our perception of her work?

2. Fraser writes, “Wilder made history” (page 5). How is this true, and in what ways does the biography bear this out? Discuss how women made history in earlier eras and how female historical figures depart from traditional male spheres of politics, government and the military. How do Wilder’s life and reputation differ, for example, from those famous frontier icons such as Daniel Boone and Davy Crockett? How reluctant are we to acknowledge women as heroes and why?

3. Discuss the Dakota Boom of the late 1870s and 1880s. Why was it a bad idea for homesteaders to farm in Dakota Territory? Since the government knew about the arid nature of the Great Plains, why did it encourage settlement there?

4. Discuss Laura and Almanzo’s courtship and early marriage. Why did they come together, and how were they compatible (or not)? How did the tensions that developed between them affect their later lives?

5. What kind of mother was Laura? How did her experience of caring for Rose compare to what we know of Caroline Ingall’s mothering skills? How did Rose respond to the tragedies of her parents’ early married life – Almazno’s illness and disability, their loss of a child, the house lost to fire – and how would it affect her later life and relationship with her parents?

6. In 1894, after failing to make a go of it in Dakota Territory, the Wilders joined a mass exodus out of the region, journeying to the “Land of the Big Red Apples” in the Missouri Ozarks. How would Laura’s exile from her family affect her, and why would she return to De Smet only once in the next couple of decades, for her father’s death? Why do you think she did not return to see her mother or her sister Mary?

7. Women’s clubs, fathers’ clubs, and book groups were crucial to the development of Wilder’s writing career. Does such networking still play a central role for urban and/or rural women?
8. Discuss Wilder’s development as a farm columnist – how did her writing for the *Missouri Ruralist* shape her ambitions and style?

9. Talk about Rose Wilder Lane’s return to Rocky Ridge Farm in the 1920s and 1930s affected her life. Why did she build another house for her parents, after their successful completion of their own farmhouse? What do you the Wilders thought of the Rock House?

10. Laura Ingalls Wilder worked for ten years for the National Farm Loan Association. So why did she object so vehemently to the New Deal programs designed to help farmers? Why was federal aid acceptable for her and not for others? If you were a rural farmer in the 1930s, how would you have felt about the federal government?

11. Do you see the influence of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression in Wilder’s memoir and the Little House books – and if so, how? Discuss the other, more personal events that led to her writing.

12. The way in which Wilder and Lane passed manuscripts back and forth between them as been described as a “collaboration.” It’s even been called “ghostwriting.” How would you describe it? Do you know of other mother/daughter professional writing relationships?

13. How have perceptions of the Little House books changed over the years, or even over the course of your own life? How has *Prairie Fires* changed your perceptions?

*(Questions provided by the publisher)*

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