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The Tenderness of Wolves: A Novel

by Stef Penney

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

Discussion Points

1. The novel is divided into four parts: Disappearance, The Fields of Heaven, The Winter Partners, and The Sickness of Long Thinking. Characterize each of these parts by what occurs within them and discuss why you think the author chose this format.
2. The people of Dove River are mostly settlers from foreign countries who have a very particular worldview rooted in their own struggle for survival. In what ways are the children in this book reflections of their parents? In what ways have they broken from their parents' examples? Does this lead to joy or sorrow? Give examples.
3. Living so rustically in such a closed society has given rise to a very particular set of rules in Dove River, such as the expectation that neighbors will make return offerings in kind when they've borrowed something. What other rules of survival -- either literally or socially -- are presented in this novel?
4. Francis is introduced as a mystery from his first day in Dove River: He arrives dressed as a girl for unknown reasons. Did you suspect that his relationship with Jammet was more than a friendship? Why or why not?
5. *The Tenderness of Wolves* is a story told from the perspective of several different characters, but Mrs. Ross's sections are the only ones written in first person. What effect does this have on your reading experience? Why do you think the author does this?
6. Mrs. Ross is always referred to formally as "Mrs. Ross," even by the narrator. What is the significance of this choice?
7. On page 154, Parker explains what the "sickness of long thinking" is to Mrs. Ross. Who in this story is suffering from the sickness of long thinking? Support your opinion with examples from the novel.
8. The author has been applauded for her ability to build suspense. Identify some of the clues she subtly drops along the way and explain how they either misdirected you or gave you hints toward solving the various mysteries of the novel.
9. Donald tries to elicit sympathy from Elizabeth for her father on page 338 by telling her, "It's only human to want an answer." Do you think this explanation satisfies her? Would it satisfy you? Why or why not? Who else in this novel is searching for answers? Does anyone find what they are looking for?
10. In contrast to most of the other relationships in this novel, Line and Espen seem to have a deep passion for one another. Were you surprised that he abandons her? Why or why not?
11. The women in this novel find themselves in situations of varying frustration and sorrow. Compare and contrast these characters: Susannah and Maria, Mrs. Ross, Ann Pretty, Line, and Elizabeth Bird. What do they have in common, and how are they different? Do you feel sympathy for any

of them? Why or why not?

12. Explore the symbolism of Donald's spectacles and his near-sightedness. What does this symbol tell you about his character? What is it that he sees most clearly just before his death?
13. Do you think that Mrs. Ross really loves William Parker, or is it something else? What did you expect would happen to Mrs. Ross when she left with Parker to track down Francis?
14. The backdrop of Canada, still largely unsettled in the mid- to late 1800s, provides a hauntingly beautiful and frighteningly dangerous setting for the lives of these very different people. How does the wilderness change the characters in this novel?
15. What is the significance of the title, *The Tenderness of Wolves*? Relate it to the story and give examples to support your interpretation.

Enhance Your Book Club Experience

1. Stef Penney is praised for her ability to create suspense and captivate her readers. She uses foreshadowing, a literary device that entails dropping subtle hints of what is to come throughout the novel. Sometimes these hints point to a plot twist, while others pull readers breathlessly through to the climax of the story. Draw a map of the clues dropped throughout *The Tenderness of Wolves* and identify what aspects of the plot they pointed to. For fun, have each member of your book club mark on the map the point at which they "figured it out."
2. The conflict between the Hudson Bay Company and free traders, as well as the eventual formation of competing companies, is at the heart of this novel. Get a flavor for this volatile situation by doing a little background research. You can start here: www.canadiana.org/hbc/intro_e.html.
3. After she burns her eyes from the glare off the frozen tundra, Mrs. Ross enjoys a piece of maple sugar -- a gift from her traveling companion, William Parker. Today, you can purchase a variety of maple candies, from maple cream -- filled chocolates to maple fudge to the traditional favorite, maple syrup. Try a taste yourself, or bring a box to your next book club meeting to share. You can purchase maple treats at most candy or gourmet food stores, such as www.vermontcountrystore.com.

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