



Discussion Questions for Mary Mann Hamilton's TRIALS OF THE EARTH

1. Between Frank's various illnesses and the mystery enshrouding his past, the deaths of her children, and day-to-day difficulties and misfortunes, Mary endures what most would call an unbearable amount of hardship. Yet, after each and every tragedy, she manages to pick herself up. What is it about Mary's character that makes her so able to carry on?
2. Despite being remarkably resilient, Mary does, from time to time, become overwhelmed and dispirited. On page 118, she writes: "Blues are the worst disease you can have in the home and far more contagious than measles." On what occasions does Mary allow herself to dwell on her setbacks? Consider momentous challenges that you've faced in your own life. What resources—external or internal—have helped you to get through difficult times?

3. A recurring theme in the book is Mary's deep-seated desire for a permanent home. At what point does she begin to realize that she might never arrive at the place she's envisioned? Even though Mary ultimately abandons hope of this idealized home, would you say that, in a way, she creates one after all?

4. What role does premonition, faith, and the supernatural play in the Hamiltons' lives? Do they have a place in your life?

5. Throughout the book, Mary expresses opinionated views on gender roles. As a reader coming to this story more than seventy-five years after it was written, what was it like to encounter these sentiments? Would you say that the views Mary articulates are obsolete in today's society? Why or why not?

6. How does Frank serve as a source of both joy and distress for Mary? If she had known the truth about his past all along, do you think it would have altered their relationship or the lives of their children?

7. It was only in her later years that Mary penned her story. How might her narrative have been different—in terms of both its content and tone—if it had been structured as a journal, with the events of her life documented and commented upon as they occurred rather than in hindsight? Do you think your experience of reading it would have been different?

8. Consider how Mary chooses to raise her children. Did anything about her child-rearing philosophy stand out to you? If so, what? How did your own upbringing compare to that of Mary's offspring?

9. On page 165, Mary states: "There was more justice in the law those days than there is now. It was a freer country." What does she mean by this? Can you imagine yourself looking back on your own life and expressing a similar sentiment? How so?

10. What was your perception of a pioneer before coming to this book? Did that perception change over the course of your read?