

## **Windfall** by Erika Bolstad

### Discussion Questions

From Helen Huntley and other sources

Bolstad nearly runs out of gas on a rural road in subzero temperatures. Have you ever run out of gas at an inopportune time and place?

Have you ever had any experience with mineral rights?

Bolstad started out thinking her great grandmother's story was that of a pioneer—a single woman who proved her own homestead. The real story turned out to be much different. Sometimes those who dig into the past find things out they'd rather not know, yet many people are captivated by genealogical research. Why do you think we want to know about our ancestors? Have you ever regretted digging up information on yours?

Bolstad has two things that belonged to Anna—a pin and a Norwegian songbook. How does owning tangible things help make the past more real? Do you have anything that belonged to your grandparents or great grandparents (or even further back)?

Have you ever been to North Dakota? What was your experience like?

Why do you think so many people in North Dakota and elsewhere are unwilling to even talk about climate change? What do we miss when we discuss extreme weather and natural disasters without acknowledging their roots in climate change?

Before reading this, were you aware of flaring—the burning off of natural gas released when drilling for oil—and its implications for climate change? What, if anything, do you think should be done about it? What else did you learn about oil exploration from reading this book?

The boom-bust cycle is typical of extractive industries like oil drilling and mining, both of which are important in the history of the west. How feasible would it even be for states like North Dakota to develop more sustainable economies?

Cultural pressures and the economic dependence on oil no doubt influence the views of many people living in North Dakota. Do you think if Bolstad's mineral rights had turned out to be worth a lot of money that she would have written her book differently? Would that have influenced you if you were writing about an inheritance?

At the end of the book, Erika is considering granting her mineral rights to the Native American tribal nations that were on the land before Anna staked her homestead claim. Since the claim is apparently worthless, do you see the symbolism as valuable? Would you do it, even if it involved extensive research on your part to prove your ownership of the claim you were giving away?

What do you think about the fact that land and its mineral rights can be separated and sold to different people? Should anyone be able to make a unilateral decision on something that has consequences for the people above ground and the larger community?

Some readers find the search for Anna engrossing but say they were turned off by the story of oil exploration and extraction on the land. What did you think of Bolstad's decision to weave these two stories together?

Bolstad writes extensively about her desire to have a child and her fertility treatments. How might her emotions and experience have affected how she researched and wrote the book? What did you think about her decision to reveal so much personal information in this story? Did you relate to her?

In the 1800s and early 1900s, it was not unusual for women to be shipped off to an insane asylum for postpartum depression or behavior their husbands considered odd. Has anyone read **The Woman They Could Not Silence** by Kate Moore or stories of other women to whom this happened?

The book contains a couple of examples of questionable journalistic ethics, the first being Bolstad's own subterfuge to participate with the press covering a visit by the interior secretary. In addition, she writes about the boosterism of early North Dakota newspapers which promoted the oil industry, not that different from what many Florida newspapers did to promote tourism. What did you think about these?

Why do so many people admire tycoons like the oil barons?

Millions of Americans are descended from people who obtained land under the Homestead Act of the 1800s. Does your family have a homestead story?