

## Reading Group Discussion Questions for *Thy Father's Will*

### A Note to the Reader:

We suggest that you finish reading *Thy Father's Will* before reviewing the reading group questions for discussion, as they reveal important aspects of the plot of the book, as well as the ending.

1. Why do you think the author, Kirsten Jacobson Stasney, gave her novel the title *Thy Father's Will*? Why do you think she chose Bible verses for the epigraphs in each section of the book? How did his Norwegian Lutheran heritage shape Joseph's identity and influence the decisions he made? What was Joseph's relationship with God?
2. Section I begins with the verse from Ecclesiastes "woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up" (page 13). What difference do you think it would have made if Joseph's wife Annie had lived? When Annie's sister wraps her arms around Anna, "Anna felt stiff in her aunt's loving, lingering embrace. The Marvicks did not hug" (page 29). Do you think Annie would have provided a nurturing home environment to balance Joseph's emphasis on control? What support systems were available to Joseph? If Joseph lived today, do you think he would have sought counseling?
3. How did Joseph's success in business influence his identity and the decisions he made?
4. *Thy Father's Will* is based on a true story that takes place at the beginning of the twentieth century. Is the story relevant to family relationships today? Could the events happen in the United States today?
5. Section II of the novel begins with the verse from Ephesians 6:1, "Children, obey your parents, ... that it may be well with you and that you may live long on the earth" (page 41). What were the cultural, community, and religious factors that influenced Joseph's authoritarian parenting style, family dynamics and his children's character development? Charlotte tells Ida she "should have stood up to" their father when he told her to break off with Oscar and explains she didn't agree to leave St. Olaf to care for Severt for her father, but instead "I did it for Severt" (page 173). How did personality type influence how Severt and Ida responded to their father? How has parental authority changed through the generations? How does parental authority differ between cultures today? How has the shift from the traditional role of parents as authority figures and moral guides for their children had on the culture of indulgence in our society?
6. What were your emotional reactions when Joseph insisted that Severt transfer to St. Olaf, when he made Ida break off her engagement, when he sent Charlotte to Denver to care for Severt and when he encouraged Ida to marry Walter? Did you understand his motivations? Did you sympathize in any way with his motives? Did your emotional reaction to Joseph change as the novel progressed? What was your emotional reaction to his decision to take his own life at the end of the book? Could you imagine yourself making any of the same decisions Joseph did?
7. How do events in the world and nation parallel what is happening in Joseph's life? What parallels do you see between the economic and political conditions during the historical period in the novel and today?

8. “As much as Joseph disapproved, as cruel as Walter could be, Joseph could do nothing” (page 227). Were you surprised by his response to Walter’s treatment of Ida? How did social, cultural and religious beliefs and attitudes toward marriage and abuse at the time affect his response and Ida’s options? How do you think Joseph would have responded today? Do you think he would have encouraged her to end her marriage? Do you think she would have? How did Ida’s relationship with her father change during the novel?
9. What did you learn about the attitudes toward and treatment of tuberculosis in the early twentieth century? How did Joseph’s attitude toward and understanding of tuberculosis change during the novel? How did it affect his decision to make Ida break her engagement to Oscar? Extremely-drug-resistant tuberculosis is a growing problem in the world today. How would you feel if your child planned to marry someone with an infectious, incurable disease?
10. In the prologue, forty years after her father’s death, Anna tells herself “Her father would not have taken his own life. The foundation of their family, he loved his children and always looked after their best interests” (page 11). Why do you think Anna refuses to accept her father’s suicide? Did she react as you expected? Why did Joseph’s children obey him? Do you think they all believed he was looking after their best interests? Do you think he was looking after their best interests?
11. In the beginning of the novel, Joseph tells his children, “People do not die of broken hearts” (page 19). Do you think Joseph would have had made the same remark at the end of the novel? Do you think Joseph died of a broken heart?
12. At the end, Joseph believes he “had sinned greatly and must be punished” (page 239). Do you believe he sinned? Do you think his children thought he had sinned? Do you believe he sinned by committing suicide?
13. What is the relationship between Joseph’s children? Does it surprise you that Charlotte did not resent Severt for the sacrifice she made for him? Do you admire Charlotte? What were your impressions of Severt and Ida? Did your impressions of the children change as the book progressed? Did Joseph’s perceptions of his children change as the book progressed?
14. Do you understand Cosette’s relationship with Severt? Joseph “did not understand why she would marry an invalid who had become too ill to leave his tent bed, could not have marital relations, and whose prospects of recovery had worsened” (page 213). Why do you think she married him?
15. Joseph’s sister Margretha tells Joseph, “I love your children as my own” (page 108). How was she perceived by Joseph and his children? Margretha sacrificed a family of her own to take care of Joseph’s children. Did you sympathize with her? Were you surprised by her influence on Joseph’s decision to make Ida break her engagement?
16. What is the significance of the crows that appear at the end of the prologue (page 11), when Joseph announces that Severt will attend St. Olaf College (page 72), and finally at the end of the book (pages 235 and 239)?