

Discussion Questions

Here are some questions that may help you to focus your thoughts about the novel, *A Wilder Rose*, and about the time and place in which the Little House books were written.

1. Have you read any of the Little House books? If so, which ones? Do you have any impressions of them? What do you remember about them?
2. Did you have any impressions of Laura Ingalls Wilder before you read this book? What made you think of her in those ways?
3. Rose's childhood was a difficult one, marked by poverty and a felt lack of affection. How do these experiences seem to affect her adult life?
4. Laura's childhood was rather different from Rose's childhood; for instance, the Ingalls couldn't seem to settle in one place. But in other ways—especially the family's poverty—it was similar. How did these experiences—the rootlessness, the poverty—affect Laura's adult life?
5. The writing of the Little House books, as it is reported in Rose's diary, is one of the novel's central storylines. Were you surprised that Rose was so deeply involved in every aspect of those books? Did this knowledge change your perceptions of the books?
6. It is clear that Rose deliberately concealed her major role in the writing of the books from her literary agent and the Harper editors. It is also clear that Laura participated in that deception, carrying it on long after the Little House series was completed. Do you accept Rose's explanations for why she did what she did? Why do you think Laura agreed to go along with the deception?
7. If you had been Laura, would you have insisted that Rose's name appear on the books? If you had been Rose, would you have wanted to claim your work? What do you think of the bargain the two women worked out?
8. One of the central themes of *A Wilder Rose* is the mother-daughter relationship and the efforts of each to manage and control the other. What evidences of Laura's control over Rose do you see? What evidences of Rose's control over Laura? Who do you think was the more controlling?
9. The theme of management/control opens a central "situational" irony in the novel—and in real life: the more Rose tries to help her mother achieve independence (financially and in her writing), the more dependent Laura becomes. If you had been counseling either or both of them, what strategies might you have suggested to ease the situation?
10. Rose and her mother both have a deep and lasting attachment to houses. Why do you think this is so? What are some of the positive effects of this affinity in their lives? What are some of the negative effects?

11. The people of Mansfield, with their traditional small-town values, play an important role in both Laura's and Rose's lives. How is this role different for mother and daughter? How is it the same?
12. Throughout *A Wilder Rose*, what we know of Laura is filtered through Rose's point of view. When the author was asked why she chose not to include Laura's point of view in the novel, she replied that there were too few traces of Laura's inner life (letters, journals) on which to base a fictional characterization. What do you think of her response? Do you think she should have tried to represent Laura? If you had been writing the novel, how would you have portrayed Laura?
13. Most of the story of *A Wilder Rose* is told from Rose's point of view, with the exception of three scenes in the Danbury house. These three scenes are told from Norma Lee's point of view (Chapters 5, 9, 12). What do we learn about Rose in these scenes that she herself might not be willing to tell us?
14. Rose became increasingly interested in political theory and practice after 1935; after she completed the Little House series (1942), that's where she devoted all her writing energy. Does this seem to you to be a logical continuation of her earlier concerns and interests, or a move in a new direction? Why?
15. Rose's life is marked by relationships with young boys in which she assumes a maternal or caregiving role: Rexh Mehta, John Turner, Roger Lea MacBride. Why do you think she became involved in these relationships? What is positive about them? What is negative?
16. Rose and Troub (Helen Boylston) had a six-year relationship (1926–1932). What do you think attracted each woman to the other? Is Rose's relationship to Troub anything like her relationship to Rexh, John, and Roger? Is her relationship with Norma Lee similar, or different?
17. How does the time—the 1930s—and the country's economic situation influence what happens in Rose's and Laura's lives? Do you think the Little House books would have been written if the Crash had not occurred?
18. Rose is a markedly different person in 1939 than she was in 1928, when she returned to Rocky Ridge with the idea of building a house for her parents. In what ways has she changed?
19. Do you think Laura changed during the same time (1928-1939)? What evidence of change do you see?
20. Rose gave her mother the gift of prestige and recognition—exactly what Laura said she wanted. What other gifts did she give her? What did Laura give to Rose? What does this say about the relationship?
21. At one point in the novel, Rose describes a scene that takes place in Mansfield. Mrs. Watson, who fancies herself something of a seer, looks at Laura's palm and tells her that she can always count on getting what she wants. Laura is not surprised. "I always have," she says. (In the novel,

this scene is depicted exactly as Rose describes it in her journal.) What does this say about Laura's experience of her life? In what ways did Laura "get what she wanted."

22. Almanzo, on the other hand, wrote to his daughter that his life had been "mostly disappointments." What disappointments might he have had in mind? What does this tell us about his outlook on life? About his relationship with his wife?

23. In the book's epigraph, Rose writes, "We are never aware of the present; each instant of living becomes perceptible only when it is past, so that in a sense we do not live at all, but only remember living." Is this true, in your experience? What are the implications of her phrase "[we] only remember living?"

