

READING GROUP GUIDE

LIGHT FROM A DISTANT STAR

1. Tolstoy's first words in *Anna Karenina* are: "Happy families are all alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." Do you think the Pecks have been a happy family? Like so many families enduring the strains of teenage rebellion and financial problems are they beginning to come undone?
2. Chapter One opens with a question, an answer, and then another question. Who is the questioner? Whose is the answering voice?
3. Nellie is at a point in her life when she is in need of heroes. Until her thirteenth summer, Benjamin Peck, Nellie's principled and upstanding father, has been her hero. What is it about Max Devaney, a brooding loner, an ex-con, that attracts Nellie when he seems to be the complete opposite of her father?
4. Compare Nellie's stubborn belief in Max's innocence and human worth with her father's unfailingly optimistic assessment of people's characters and motives.
5. Why is Nellie so often drawn to edgy, offbeat people, Jessica Cooper, Bucky Saltonstall, Max Devaney, Dolly Bedelia, the Shelby twins Roy and Rodney, as well as her caustic grandfather?
6. What purpose does the hand-to-hand combat manual from World War II, "Get Tough" serve in Nellie Peck's quest for courage and strength? Does it give her confidence enough to confront the truth around her?
7. Is there any connection between Ruth Peck's search for her "real" father and her sister Nellie's ironically similar quest?
8. What is the significance of Benjamin Peck's blinkered determination to complete the town's history he's been working on for years? Is the past a safer, saner, more manageable reality for him than his everyday, ordinary life?
9. The *Washington Independent Book Review* writes, "Boone is Nellie's doppelganger in animal form." How is this apparent in the novel?
10. Max says of his dog Boone, "Obeying, that's the most important thing. Only thing'll keep him safe." Do these words also apply to Nellie?
11. Nellie's grandfather's junkyard, both eyesore and environmental hazard, sits right in the heart of Springvale. "It's Charlie's now," locals say of anything broken-

- down, unwanted, unfixable. Is Max veritable human trash, also unwanted, shunned, discarded? Was his youthful conviction fair?
12. Sandy Peck regrets renting the back apartment to irresponsible and sexy Dolly Bedelia. How is her unsavory tenant, like Max, another reminder of her embarrassing childhood?
 13. What is Lazlo Larouche's appeal to both Sandy and Benjamin Peck?
 14. Is Nellie's loyalty to her longtime friend, the bullying Jessica Cooper, based as much on empathy as it is on the pleasures of Jessica's seductive hospitality, unlimited television watching and snacks?
 15. In what ways is Nellie very much her father's daughter, an idealist, a romanticist? If Nellie is still an innocent, can the same be said of her father?
 16. Sandy Peck loves her husband, admires his intellect and tries to be loyal, especially in the children's presence. Is her growing impatience with Benjamin justified? And how does it affect their children? Would it help or make things worse if she were more forceful and outspoken? Should parents openly discuss financial problems with their children?
 17. Why does Nellie consider her relationship with her mother so much more complicated than her relationship with her father? Is one parent more honest with her than the other? Or are her confusing feelings often typical of the mother-daughter dynamic?
 18. Ruth is far more aware of Benjamin's failings than Nellie. Are family troubles the catalyst for Ruth's determination to contact her birth father? Or is that need, that identity crisis a natural stage in the life of an adoptee?
 19. Does the heroic act of Ruth's birth father compare in any way to aspects of Benjamin Peck's life?
 20. What is the significance of Tenley Humboldt's statement that when he was bullied and humiliated as a child Benjamin stood by and did nothing?
 21. Upon seeing Lazlo's painting of the children's tree house, Nellie thinks: "It looked like their tree house, but it didn't. His was a nest of boards and sticks, without nails or bolts, more image than structure. More hope than reality. An idea that with the first strong wind would come crashing down." Is this emblematic of Nellie's experiences?
 22. As children grow older and change, they often need their parents to stay just the way they've always been. How does recognizing her beloved father's flaws affect Nellie's growth?

23. Is Nellie's moral vs. familial struggle too great a burden to impose upon a young girl? Which would you put first, Family or Truth?
24. What might the author be suggesting about the human spirit when Nellie recommends her "Get Tough" manual to Jessica Cooper?
25. Monica Rohr asks an interesting question in her Associated Press review, "Morris ... nimbly laces her latest novel with a growing sense of dread, hinting at the awfulness that is about to enter the lives of Nellie and her fragile family. But is that awfulness the violence itself, the aftermath, or simply the terrible knowledge that comes when all veneers are stripped away?"
26. At the time of the murder trial, Nellie is faced with an overwhelming moral dilemma. She believes as sincerely in one man's innocence as she does in another man's guilt, though without real, tangible, scientific proof of either. So, how can she destroy one man in order to save another? Is it acceptable to tell a lie in order to live in the Truth?
27. How does the previous statement relate to the novel's opening and closing words?

From the author:

In my original notes for "Light From a Distant Star," the very first words written at the top of the page are "Heroism and Courage. Story told looking back on childhood." Also in my seemingly random notes is the almost incomprehensible fact that when we look up at the stars we are seeing the past. And that the very light we are experiencing may well be from stars that no longer exist. Swirling through this mix of ideas were memories of my own childhood, particularly the tree house two of my brothers built in our side yard. I still remember it as being big and sturdy with room enough for all of us, even though a trip back home some years ago made me realize how small it actually must have been then. But in a child's life, refuge and safety enhance reality and magnify scale. It was our own structure, our own place to go to in a tree that wasn't ours on property we only rented like the other tenants in the big old house we lived in on the corner. Such is the thrall of a story that time, memory, and desire so easily confabulate literal truth into ideal truth, leaving one to wonder which is more necessary, more real.