

Study Guide: The Plain Sense of Things

We drop into Pamela Carter Joern's powerful connected stories, *The Plain Sense of Things*, like unexpected guests who are invited to stay for dinner. From this intimate place at the table, we bear witness to fleeting moments in the fifty-year history of the Preston clan, a rural Nebraska family. With wry humor, insight, and unflagging compassion, Joern sees in all of life—its sorrows and its triumphs—a chance for deepening the heart. She settles on characters who seldom show up on the evening news, the people who live with hardship and dignity all across America, and we come away richer for having known them.

1. Joern's stories are set against a backdrop of historical happenings: the Great Depression, the disappearance of Amelia Earhart, World War II, the killing spree of Charles Starkweather, the resignation of Nixon. How does Joern use these large events to illuminate the lives of her characters? What does Joern suggest about the role of history in our lives?
2. Did you have a favorite story? A favorite character? Why?
3. The first story, in which a grandfather goes to retrieve his grandson when his estranged daughter dies, sets a tone for the following stories. What do we learn about Gramp? How does his temperament and way of dealing with his family influence future generations?
4. Several of these stories touch on abuse in the lives of women: the battered woman befriended by Mary, the woman who seeks an illegal abortion, hints of Grace's troubles, the eruption of violence between Jake and Alice. What do these situations have to say about place and time? What is the role of isolation? Do you think these situations might be handled differently today? If so, how?
5. When Alice and Jake have problems, Stevie, Frank and Molly are scared and bewildered. What "saves" each of them, and how does that coping mechanism play into the adults they become?
6. Jake's medical problems weave throughout several of the stories. What issues arise for his family from living with undiagnosed disease or illness they do not understand? Do you think we still struggle with illnesses we don't understand? What modern illnesses result in social isolation?
7. The characters of these stories place a high value on family, even though there are problems and separations. How is this family devotion demonstrated? What is the relationship of this family to the local community? The larger world?
8. The stories begin with Jake and Alice's families of origin, merged through the marriage of Alice's father and Jake's sister. Eventually, the focus shifts to Alice and Jake's immediate family. Why does Joern start with their families of origin? What does providing this context say about the texture of life? Some of the early characters fade into the background. What does this suggest about the continuity of this American family?
9. After the farm sale, Jake tries to follow a dream of becoming a songwriter. What does this pursuit reveal about Jake's character? Are you sympathetic to his plight?

10. Besides the marriage of Jake and Alice, Joern explores other familial relationships: siblings, parent-child, stepparents and grandparents to children, aunts and uncles and cousins. How do these relationships deepen the stories?
11. How do these characters—with limited resources—cope with difficulty? Where does their resilience arise from? Are there different sources of strength for different characters?
12. Alice and Jake are faced with unforeseen challenges. Do you think their difficulties are due to fate, chance, or regrettable choices? What does Joern seem to be saying about the role of personal responsibility?
13. At the heart of these stories is the relationship between Jake and Alice. What holds these two people together? Do you think they understand each other?
14. Alice's children grow up to move far away from her, in distance, as well as in education and experience. Do you think this is typical of families from rural America? What holds these generations together? What's lost, for both Alice and her children, by their upward mobility?
15. What signs of hope are given in the last chapter? What do you think will happen to Alice and these grown children's families? If you were going to write the next story—after another 5 years—what might happen?