

## ***Wild Horses of the Summer Sun*** by Tory Bilski Reading Group Guide

### Preface

1. "Blame it or praise it, there is no denying the wild horse in us." (Virginia Woolf)  
What does Woolf mean by this statement?  
Is there a "wild horse" in you? How has that "wild horse" affected your life?

### Book I Questions

2. The last line of Book V is this: "There were our tales, these were the times, these were the women, and this was the place." In an online interview Tory Bilski said that she wrote the memoir for three reasons: her love of a special place (Iceland), her love of horses, and her love of women friends.

Do you love a special place? Where is it and why is it meaningful to you?  
Do you return there often? Or do you often revisit it in your memory and why?

3. Do you love horses? If you do, why?  
If you do, when did you first experience that love?  
What is it that attracts humans to horses, specifically or overall?

4. We all have women friends, some dearer than others.  
How have women friends changed or affected your life, specifically or overall?  
Is there a "Sylvie" in your life? A "Viv"? Or an "Eve"?

5. On pages 60-66, the author cancels her 2006 trip to Iceland because of circumstances involving her elderly parents. Did you relate to those episodes? Why and how?

6. In an interview, Tory Bilski read aloud the passage about crossing Lake Hop on horseback, "the transformative moment in [her] life." The entire passage is on pages 55-58, "A Thin Place." Here is an excerpt:

"I think of the Celtic belief of a thin liminal place where the door between this world and another is cracked open for only a moment, and this feels like that place for me, or the closest I will ever get to that place. I have fallen into a crack of watery light, and for one icy moment I have been allowed a glimpse into the transparency of the other world. I think, When I die this is how I want to enter the other world, on the back of a horse that is swimming in a cold lake. And I will cross over into myth."

Have you experienced one moment in your life that transformed you?  
If you have, how did it change you?

### Books II and III Questions

7. Books II and III explore the concept of taking risks, some personal, some physical, and some financial. On page 75 Tory writes, "Horse ownership is estimated to be 80 percent female in the United States....I think horse love is for the lonely girls at heart. That's the club we once all belonged to, whatever our adult life many appear to be built upon. Whatever I or Eve or Sylvie or Viv have become, we started out quietly unsociable, spending too much time alone in our imaginative horse world. The only risk we wanted to take was with horses. The horse took us [all] away from and into the world."

Do you agree that a girl and/or woman's love of horses is rooted in loneliness? Why or why not?

8. Horsemanship is considered an extreme sport because of its inherent and potentially lethal risks. There are several episodes in Books II and III which focus on risk-taking involving horses, such as the confrontation of Disa and the bulls on p. 88, the group standing "frozen together" in the stampede on p. 109, and the inevitability of falling off one's horse on p. 123.

Is such risk-taking brave or foolhardy? What is the difference?

If you were/are an experienced rider, would you take these risks? Why or why not?

9. For the author a horse barn is a sacred place.

On pp. 80-81 she writes, "Not only are we in Iceland, but we're in the barn, which is like entering a sanctuary, and grooming a horse is a ritual of love and devotion....It's meditative. There is a quiet stillness to an empty barn that is like the quiet stillness of an empty church; you just naturally lower your voice when you enter. Rows of empty stalls are like rows of empty pews, patiently waiting for the horses, waiting for the parishioners."

Do you have a sacred place, manmade or natural, that is your sanctuary from reality? Describe it and its meditative qualities.

10. Aspects of horsekeeping and horse training are described in detail in Books II and III. In "Stallions and Mares, Oh My" on p. 111, the death of the young white mare is upsetting, but Gunnar "unceremoniously scoops her up in the front loader." To Tory the Icelanders' relationship with horses or pets of any kind is very different from that of Americans (p. 108). Do Americans anthropomorphize their pets too much?

There are no horse rescues in Iceland because 'hurt, damaged, or very old, unproductive horses' are routinely put down. Does the Icelanders' relationship with their horses seem practical or callous to you? If you owned an old horse that needed 'prescribed medicines like someone in a nursing home,' what would you do?

11. Book III ends in 2010, “Annus Horribilis.” Iceland’s economy is “a mess,” Iceland’s horses are stricken with a horse flu from Germany, and Eve’s farm in the Berkshires is officially for sale. The group is clearly distressed by all these changes, and Tory confesses, “I want to be Helga. I want to live on an Icelandic horse farm. I want to have been born Icelandic....I want the surety of my place in this world.”

In troubled times, have you ever wished you could be someone else and live her life? Explain.

12. Which one of the photos is your favorite and why?

### Books IV and V Questions

13. The women’s personalities are very distinct by Book IV, and Pippa begins to show her true colors—her “frosty attitude” in Book IV and her outright “meanness” as she bullies Viv and the others in Book V.

How did you feel about Pippa over time? Have you ever known a “Pippa”?

If you were Sylvie or Tory, would you have handled the situation differently?

14. The supernatural world plays a role in Icelandic culture with its stories of ghosts, elves, and trolls (152-156).

Do you personally believe in the supernatural or other-worldly entities? Why?

Or do you believe that “these tales of the supernatural are projections of dreams or anxieties...”? (156)

15. The Sagas (the ancient oral histories) of Iceland are another recurring motif.

Did you have a favorite among those described—that of Hallgerd (38-39), Freydis (88-89), or Aud (182)? What are some themes that they all had in common?

16. How is the life and death of Agnes Magnúsdóttir in 1830 similar to one of the Sagas? (210-2016)

When Helga asked her guests what they personally wanted of their husbands, they replied humor, excitement, trust, escape, and dependability. What qualities do you look for in a significant other and why?

17. We are reminded that Helga was “outstandingly beautiful” at the end of Book V.

Why do you think the author emphasized that information after Helga announced that she was selling her horse farm of 20 years and “giving it all up...[that] perfect life in a perfect place”?

18. Two quotes near the end of Book V relate to each other.

On p. 204, Tory’s “Aunt Ruthie used to say that when you get older, you’re you, still the same you, but you become more you...Our minds and hearts become fat and swollen with experiences and memories of places and people, and this makes us ‘more.’”

Later on p. 222 Tory writes, “While most people Sylvie’s age [in her late 70s] or younger are downsizing their lives and saving money for real old age, Sylvie is expanding her life, buying more property, more horses, starting a farm. As Sylvie gets older, she’s still Sylvie, only more so, Sylvie at the peak of her Sylvie-ness.”

Are you ‘more you’ now than you ever were before?

Are you at ‘the peak’ of your being you?

19. Near the end of the memoir (235) Tory writes, “And so it was, year after year, Queen Sylvie and her merry band traveled to their favored golden summerland of Thingeyrar.”

Did you see aspects of yourself in each and every member of the ‘merry band’?

20. Are you more like ONE of the women in the memoir: Queen Sylvie, Eve the Cheerful, Viv the Unweary, Helga the Deep-Minded, or Tory the Scribe? Why?