



Discussion Questions for Anne Korkeakivi's SHINING SEA

1. What does the title SHINING SEA mean to you?
2. How does Michael's legacy as a WWII veteran, former POW, and ultimately war hero affect his family? Have members of your own family served or had a first-hand experience of war? If so, how may it have influenced the worldviews of you and the other members of your family?
3. On pages 9 and 10, Barbara describes her brother's WWII experience and Michael "understands right away that this is how she survives, that this is the way she has chosen to navigate this world. That she is a girl who will fight to the end, fight to remain cheerful no matter what life throws at her." Much later, on page 244, Barbara says of herself: "She's been lucky, really." Do you consider Barbara to be a lucky person? Is positive thinking useful or an act of denial? Is it possible for it to be both?
4. On page 43, Francis remembers his father saying about his old army canteen, "Sometimes it's the littlest things, boys." Which does Michael believe saved him as a prisoner of war in the Pacific: having the canteen or sharing it? Does the same idea play out elsewhere in SHINING SEA? In life?

5. Francis finds his extraordinary beauty to be a burden. Do you think his being a man makes his physical appeal more or less of an encumbrance than were he a woman? Does his gender affect your feelings about how he comes to use it?

6. Why does Eugene do what he does halfway into SHINING SEA? Do you believe Francis is implicated? What responsibilities do we have towards our friends, and does being the recipient of better fortune carry additional responsibilities?

7. On page 41, discussing the Watts Riots, Patty Ann says, "We're starting a world war over in Vietnam. Why not set our own backyard on fire?" What do you think she means by this? Now, a half-century later, does this seem like a uniquely 1960s frame of mind, or is the same idea still kicking around in any form?

8. What do you think of Patty Ann and her life choices?

9. Michael Gannon is called a hero for saving the lives of fellow POWs. But "hero" can have diverse definitions--for example, on page 143, Francis says about the Vietnam War: "[In Europe] it's not like in the US, where some people consider conscientious objectors to have been traitors and others consider them to be heroes." What makes someone a "hero," in your eyes? Could any of the other characters also be considered a hero? Whom in real life would you call a hero? Why?

10. Nature plays a pivotal role in the section of the novel set in Scotland, much of which takes place at sea. But that's not the only section where nature influences the action or story. If you think back through all the other places in SHINING SEA where nature appears, does the frequency surprise you? Are we always conscious of the role of nature in our lives and modern world?

11. Towards the end of the novel, the question arises as to whether two of the characters have had a "real" marriage. Do you think they have? What do you think constitutes a "real" marriage? Has this changed in any way over time?

12. On page 242, Barbara says, "The thing about life is it is so damned confusing. Such a web, each piece of it dependent on something else, something that can be as tiny as a smile from a stranger or as huge as heart disease. The good all tangled up with the bad." Do you agree? Can you see instances in your life or in the broader world where good things depend upon bad things happening and vice-versa? Is it worth the bad to get to the good?

13. Which character in SHINING SEA, if any, do you most relate to and why?

14. The generation that came of age during the 1960s challenged the norms of their parents' generation, most overtly through hippy culture. Is this something specific to that era, or is it a cycle that repeats itself? Discuss.

15. The Gannons describe themselves as "an American family." Is their path particularly American? What does it mean to be an American family?