



Kirsten's Surprise

A Conversation Guide

Below are suggested topics and passages to use when reading *Kirsten's Surprise*.

1. The Christmas season is special to Kirsten and her family. What do they do to celebrate? What do you and your family do to celebrate special holidays in your life?

Some examples from the story include Kirsten and Mama making Christmas bread, Kirsten planning the Saint Lucia celebration, and Kirsten and Mr. Berkhoff exchanging Christmas bread and candy.

2. Kirsten's family is working hard to build a new home in Minnesota, but they miss Sweden, too. How does the story show this?

Discuss the conversation between Mama and Kirsten on pages 5–8. Using the passages below, talk about how sharing memories might make Mama sad but also bring the mother and daughter closer. Ask readers if they have any items that help them remember someone special. Talk about how Kirsten wants to get the family's trunks and celebrate Saint Lucia's Day to remind everyone of Sweden.

- "Our things can have special meanings for us. They help us remember." (p. 7)
- Kirsten was surprised to see tears in Mama's blue eyes. She didn't know that Mama could get homesick, too. "Mama, are you all right?" Kirsten asked. Abruptly, Mama turned and shoved the bread tray into the cupboard. "Of course I'm all right." She poured coffee into the coffee pail and held it out to Kirsten. "Now take this hot coffee out to the barn for Papa. He forgets to rest and warm himself unless we remind him. Let's get on with our work, Kirsten." (pp. 7–8)

3. In chapter 1, why do you think Kirsten's parents tell her to stop asking about going to fetch the trunks? What risks would be involved in getting the trunks?

Using passages like the ones below, discuss how much work needs to be done and the added pressure of having to finish the tasks before the first heavy snow. Talk about how stressed Kirsten's parents are and why Papa would tell Kirsten, "Don't ask me again or I'll be angry!" on page 19. Emphasize that the family's survival through the winter depends on the completion of these tasks. By agreeing to go get the trunks before the work is done, Kirsten's parents could put the family at risk.

- "Maryville is ten miles away, Kirsten," Mama said. "It will take Papa half a day to get there and back with the wagon. It's too late to go today." (p. 5)
- The hogs had to be butchered and the meat smoked. Papa and Uncle Olav spent a whole week repairing fences. They put new runners on the sleigh and new shoes on the horse. In the evenings they mended harness leather and stuffed extra clay between the logs in the cabin walls to make the cabin warmer. They put up a fence to keep snowdrifts off the path to the barn. When the heavy snows came it would be too late to do these important things. (pp. 9–10)

4. Kirsten and her cousins don't have everything they need to celebrate Saint Lucia's Day. Who do they go to for help? What creative ways do they come up with to replace the items they don't have?

Talk about the traditions Kirsten shares with her cousins on pages 12–16. Discuss why the girls go to Miss Winston for help and how they use what they have available, such as grapevine and wintergreen, to make items like the Saint Lucia crown.

5. How does Kirsten show bravery during the snowstorm? What does she do to encourage herself to keep going?

At first, Kirsten thinks about how dangerous snowstorms can be. Discuss how she doesn't let those thoughts stop her from volunteering to lead the horse when Papa hurts his knee. Talk about how Kirsten encourages herself by taking things one step at a time, remembering her family's motto "have heart," and thinking about her warm home and Christmas.

- Like the horse, she bent her head into the wind and concentrated on just one step, then the next, then the next. (p. 38)
- *Keep going*, she told herself. *Have heart, Kirsten*. (p. 39)



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