



Meet Kirsten

A Conversation Guide

Below are suggested topics and passages to use when reading *Meet Kirsten*.

1. When she leaves Sweden, Kirsten brings her doll as her treasured possession. What role does her doll play as Kirsten's story unfolds?

Discuss the times that Kirsten turns to Sari for comfort, how Kirsten feels when she has to leave Sari in a trunk during her family's travels, and how Sari helps Kirsten make friends with her cousins Anna and Lisbeth.

After discussing what Sari means to Kirsten, ask readers to consider what one item they might want to bring with them if they were in Kirsten's position, why they would select that item, and how they would feel if they had to be parted from it.

2. What challenges does Kirsten's family face in this book? What do they mean when they tell each other not to lose heart in these moments?

Discuss the Larson family's long journey to America, the language barriers they face when they arrive, the expense of the trip, the illnesses they encounter along the way, and the exhaustion of a long journey by boat, train, wagon, and foot. Use the information in the Looking Back and these sample passages from the story:

- As Kirsten climbed down the ladder into the hold, her spirits sank. Of course she didn't want to be washed overboard by the waves, but it was awful to stay in this small room below the deck. For more than two months, twenty Swedish families had been cramped together here. (p. 4)
- For days, the train traveled through fields and forests. When they stopped for water, a man from the railroad opened the door for a few minutes, but the air stayed hot and hard to breathe. Everyone was quiet, dazed by the heat. (p. 29)
- Kirsten wanted to be brave. She wanted to have heart, like Mama. But she sank down on the steps of a brown house, hid her face in her doll's skirt, and wept. (p. 20)

Ask readers to think about what it means to be brave and "have heart" in the face of big challenges. Discuss how crying, being scared, or worrying doesn't mean you aren't brave or don't "have heart."

3. Kirsten is excited to get to America, but she learns that immigrants with diseases are not allowed to stay in America. How does Kirsten react when she learns this?

When Kirsten and her brothers are worried about Mama, who has been seasick on the boat, how does Papa reassure them? Discuss why countries had health rules for immigrants and whether you think these rules helped prevent illness from affecting immigrants and other people. Consider what happened to Marta on the riverboat, too.

4. When the Larsons arrive in Minnesota, Papa tells his family that they will have a better life. What does he mean? In what ways does Papa think that their lives will be better?

Using the information in the Looking Back with the passage below, discuss how immigrants saw America as a land with opportunities they didn't have in their homelands. Ask readers to think about why good soil was so important to Kirsten's family and other European immigrants and how it might lead to a better life even for those who weren't farmers. For instance, a blacksmith might not farm any land, but the more farmers there are in that area, the more horseshoes, tools, and equipment the blacksmith will be paid to make.

- "Olav wrote us the truth," Papa said. "The soil here is good. We'll have a better life." Before they walked on, Kirsten picked a daisy for Mama to wear at her collar. (p. 44)

5. Thinking about the question you just answered and what you learned in the Looking Back, how did the arrival of settlers like Kirsten's family change the lives of the Ojibwe and Dakota people who lived in the Minnesota Territory? What role did the U.S. government play?

Using the information in the Looking Back, discuss how European settlers moved onto land where the Ojibwe and Dakota people lived, and what problems that might have caused for each group. Explain that treaties are promises between nations. What does it mean for a government to break a treaty? What other problems might that create?



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