



# Happy Birthday, Kirsten!

## A Conversation Guide

Below are suggested topics and passages to use when reading *Happy Birthday, Kirsten!*

- 1. When the tornado comes, Kirsten's aunt brings the family Bible and Miss Winston brings a quilt with them into the cellar. Why do they bring these items? If you were in their situation, what would you bring with you?**

Using the passages below, discuss the items that Kirsten's aunt and teacher bring into the cellar and the meaning behind each of them. Talk about why the items would be important reminders of the family's history and relatives.

- Aunt Inger held the family Bible in her lap—it was the most important thing the Larsons owned. Every night Uncle Olav or Papa read from it. In the front of the Bible the names and important dates for everyone in the whole family were written. Kirsten liked to read her own birthday there: Kirsten Larson, born June 8, 1845, Ryd, Sweden. (p. 6)
- "I just knew I had to save my quilt, so I took it and ran..." "My mother and my aunts and cousins and my sister made this quilt for me. They gave it to me to remember them by when I left home." (pp. 7–8)

- 2. What tasks does Kirsten do for her mother to prepare for the new baby? Why does Kirsten need to help, and how does it make her feel?**

Discuss the tasks Kirsten does in the passages below. Emphasize how hard women in the Minnesota Territory had to work to have clothes and food. Talk about how the hard work could cause health issues for Kirsten's mother or new sibling if Kirsten's mother was doing it all herself. Encourage readers to see that Kirsten isn't eager to help, but she does it because it's her obligation to help out.

- Kirsten sighed. It was tiresome to hem shirts and diapers for the baby Mama was expecting. Why did a baby need so many diapers? Surely three or four would be enough. (p. 10)
- Helping out meant more and more work for Kirsten. The cows gave more milk in the spring, so there was cheese to make and butter to churn. The chickens were laying again, and Kirsten had to feed them and gather eggs. She picked berries and greens to eat, too, and cooked breakfast and dinner when Mama wasn't able to be on her feet. Every night when her chores were done, Kirsten went straight to bed and fell asleep. And as soon as she woke in the morning, she started on that day's tasks. There was no time for sewing now. (p. 21)

- 3. How do Kirsten's cousins and classmates help her feel included when she can't join them in sewing the quilt for their teacher?**

Discuss how Kirsten's cousins and classmates demonstrate empathy and kindness by making her the quilt, like in the passage below. How would giving the quilt make her cousins and classmates feel? How does receiving the

quilt make Kirsten feel? It may be helpful to link this conversation with the response from question #1 about important keepsakes. Talk about things your reader can do to help classmates feel included.

- “And we’re giving this one to you because you missed out on the fun of making it,” Lisbeth explained. “We want you to know we didn’t forget you, even when you weren’t with us.” (p. 46)

#### **4. Why does Kirsten’s family need help from others to build their barn? What kinds of help do their neighbors provide?**

Using passages like the one below, talk about how a lot of help would be required to build a barn in Kirsten’s time. Discuss the different roles someone would play depending on their age and gender. Things to talk about include cooking, building, and looking after children. Also discuss how this was a social event for families.

- Papa had explained several times how the men would pull up the big beams and posts to make the barn. The beams were so long and heavy that Kirsten couldn’t imagine how they would be raised. (pp. 35–36)

#### **5. Mama suggests Kirsten plan a special day with her friends to celebrate her birthday. How does she celebrate? How is her celebration similar to how you celebrate your birthday? How is it different?**

Discuss why Mama suggests Kirsten plan a special day and how Kirsten decides to celebrate using passages like the ones below.

- “Our barn raising will be on the day before your birthday. I thought you might like to do something special when your friends are here,” Mama said. “You’ve done the work of two women lately, and you deserve a day to play.” (p. 37)
- Kirsten thought about picking wildflowers and playing games. And maybe there would be a cake to share. A barn raising and a birthday celebration, too! (p. 38)



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