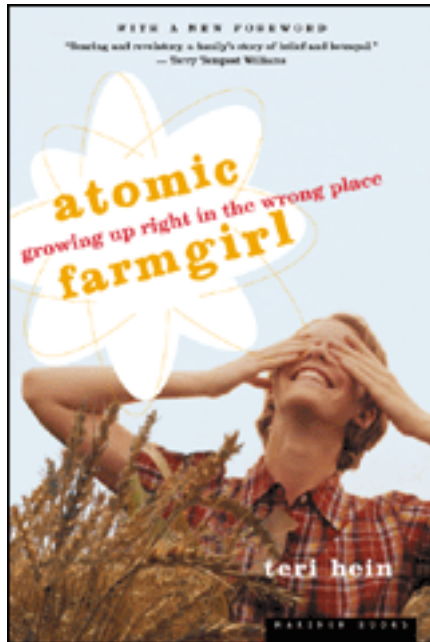


## A Reader's Guide



# Atomic Farmgirl

by Teri Hein

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## About the Author

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Teri Hein grew up on a wheat farm originally homesteaded by her great-grandparents in eastern Washington. In the years since she left home for college, she has led an adventurous life—teaching abroad, rafting the Grand Canyon, traveling to northwestern Pakistan, doing research in the Amazon jungle, and hiking above the Arctic Circle. She received a master's degree in education from the University of Washington and has been granted awards for her teaching as well as a Fulbright scholarship. Currently Hein lives in Seattle and teaches children who are undergoing cancer treatment at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. *Atomic Farmgirl* is her first book.

## Questions for Discussion

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1. How does Hein present the realities of farm life? Is this lifestyle more effectively revealed through detailed accounts of the actual process or through the people whose lives revolve around the vocation?
2. Hein writes: "Wheat is our thing, and a thousand acres of it swaying in the breeze is, for us in the Palouse, about the most beautiful thing on Earth. We

put pictures of wheat on our Grain Growers Association calendars and write poems about it when we go off to college" (p. 61). What does this book say about the connection that people develop with the land? Do you think the connection Hein writes about is unique because the land has been passed down from generation to generation? What underlying themes of "home" does she present that can be applied universally?

**3.** What devices does Hein use to develop and emphasize the different personalities in her community without confusing the reader with an overabundance of names? How does this method of storytelling illustrate the interconnectedness of the community?

**4.** Hein creates a vivid portrait of the early immigrants to the West. How does she characterize their lifestyle? How has it changed over the generations?

**5.** What does *Atomic Farmgirl* reveal about family dynamics? Which relationships does Hein explore at the greatest length? How has her relationship with her family shaped her life?

**6.** In what ways does Hein's experience with Rockette illustrate the relationships people develop with their animals? How does Rockette's death contrast with the other deaths Teri experienced during her youth?

**7.** Of her mother, Hein writes: "She was the only woman we knew who had been to college, which meant she knew loads of impractical things, such as the names of rivers in Africa and how to explain photosynthesis to us. When she referred to a book she was reading, she often said the author's name as if it were part of the title. 'I'm reading Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*,' or 'I just finished *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf,' she would say to us, her daughters, who didn't ever care about these things until much later" (p. 11). How does Hein's mother defy the traditional conventions associated with the farm wife? What effect did her unconventionalness have on Hein and her sisters?

**8.** As present as the physical deaths of individuals in the community is the idea of a dying lifestyle. How would you characterize the elements that are dying? What effect does this process have on the community as a whole?

**9.** In what ways does Hein show how close-knit her community was? Does this closeness ever border on becoming an intrusion on people's privacy? What are the advantages and disadvantages to living in a community like

this?

**10.** Throughout her narrative, Hein draws upon the Native American history associated with the land. How is this history woven into her story? What effect does this have on the narrative?

**11.** Although the book is nonfiction, what aspects of the author's style contribute to its reading much like fiction? What effect would the stories have if they were told in a more formal manner?

**12.** As an adult Hein has gone on to lead an adventurous life and move to a city. Based on what you know about her childhood, why is this both surprising and predictable?

**13.** Hein draws a contrast between the development of her own small community and that of Richland, a town that grew because of the creation of the Hanford nuclear plant. In what ways do planned communities differ culturally from those that develop naturally?

**14.** During the Cold War the government, in the name of security, secretly released radioactive materials over Washington State, which many believe had enormous health consequences for the residents living there. How should we think about this government action, especially now with our concerns about national security?

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