

Discussion Questions for

THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY

by Amor Towles

About the Book

In June 1954, eighteen-year-old Emmett Watson is driven home to Nebraska by the warden of the juvenile work farm where he has just served fifteen months for involuntary manslaughter. His mother long gone, his father recently deceased, and the family farm foreclosed upon by the bank, Emmett's intention is to pick up his eight-year-old brother, Billy, and head to California where they can start their lives anew. But when the warden drives away, Emmett discovers that two friends from the work farm have hidden themselves in the trunk of the warden's car. Together, they have hatched an altogether different plan for Emmett's future, one that will take them all on a fateful journey in the opposite direction—to the City of New York.

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think Emmett, Duchess, Woolly, and Sally's various upbringings—particularly their relationships to their parents—have shaped them? How have their parents' choices influenced their own desires and ambitions? When you were eighteen, which aspects of your parents' lives did you hope to emulate, and which did you hope to cast aside?
2. Early in the novel, Emmett meets Sister Agnes, a nun who describes the faith of children, who look upon a miracle "with awe and wonder, yes, but without disbelief." From the context, it's clear that Sister Agnes is referencing Billy in her remark. How would you describe Billy's personality? While he is the youngest and least experienced character in the novel, one could argue that he has the greatest influence on other characters. What is it about Billy that makes this so?
3. Throughout the novel, an array of stories is recalled—stories drawn from Professor Abernath's *Compendium*, from the Vaudevillian world of Duchess's father, from Shakespeare, cinema, and the Bible. What role do stories play in the shaping of the different characters' lives and personalities? Are these stories a productive or counterproductive force?
4. The novel takes place in the mid-1950s—a period of peace, prosperity, and upward mobility in the US; a period in which television was in its infancy, and which came just before the advents of rock & roll, the modern civil rights movement, and the "sexual revolution". How does the era shape the journeys of the characters, if at all? What aspect of their journeys are unique to their times, and what aspects were shared by you when you were on the verge of adulthood?
5. Is money one of the central themes of the book since it is on the minds of all the characters? On a related note, discuss the broader themes in the novel of moral accounting: of debt and recompense, transgression and atonement, sin, and redemption.
6. The City of New York is a thousand cities rolled into one. How does New York differ in the eyes of Emmett, Duchess, Woolly, and Billy?

7. *Timepieces* such as Billy's surplus watch, the two grandfather clocks, Marceline's pocket watch, and Wallace's officer's watch; *Tables, Desks, & Chairs* such as the furniture in the doll case at FAO Schwarz, the long table in the dining room at the camp, and the desks of "Dennis" and Professor Abernath; *Cases* such as the wicker picnic basket, Woolly's cigar box, Harry Hewett's Othello case, and the shoebox of preserves are all recurring motifs. What role do any of these motifs play in the thematic composition of the book?
8. The tone of each character's chapters differs from the tone of the other characters' chapters. How would you describe the style of the different characters' chapters? To what degree does the style shape your sense of the characters' personalities? How does reading Duchess's first-person narrative influence you in comparison to Emmett's third person narrative?
9. Emmett's father leaves Emmett a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Self-Reliance" as part of his legacy. Do you agree with Emerson's argument that what is within the individual is new to nature, and that we have no idea of what we can achieve until we've tried? What about Emerson's idea strikes you as particularly American? What about this novel strikes you as particularly American? What does self-reliance mean to Emmett, to Duchess, and to Sally?
10. There are several smaller legacies in the novel. In addition to the Emerson quotation left to Emmett, there are the recipes handed down to Sally, the officer's watch handed down in the Wolcott family, the St. Christopher medal passed from Billy to Ulysses. What role do these small legacies play within the larger themes of the novel?
11. How would you describe each main character's transformation over the course of the novel? Which character do you think evolves most significantly? Which characters, in your opinion, found what they were looking for? Do you have a favorite character, and why them?
12. Woolly's sister, Sarah, observes to Emmett: "If you take a trait that by all appearances is a merit—a trait that is praised by pastors and poets, a trait that we have come to admire in our friends and hope to foster in our children—and you give it to some poor soul in abundance, it will almost certainly prove an obstacle to their happiness." Do you think this is true? What virtue do you think each of the main characters possesses in excess?

Author Biography

Born and raised in the Boston area, Amor Towles graduated from Yale College and received an MA in English from Stanford University. Having worked as an investment professional for over twenty years, he now devotes himself full time to writing in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and two children. His novels *Rules of Civility*, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, and *The Lincoln Highway* have collectively sold more than five million copies and been translated into more than thirty languages. Towles's short stories have appeared in the *Paris Review* (#112), *Granta* (#148), *British Vogue*, and *Audible Originals*.