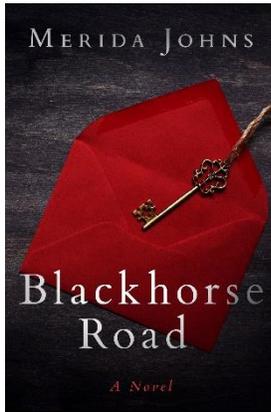


## Discussion Questions:

### *Blackhorse Road* A Novel by Merida Johns



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Numerous themes form the bedrock of the story and characters in *Blackhorse Road*. Below are several quotes made by the characters in the book. Have each club member choose one to three of these that have the most meaning to them and use the following questions to prompt your discussion.

- What attracted you to this quote? Did the quote connect with you on an emotional level?
- What is the theme underlying the quote? How was this theme used to develop the story and characters?
- Is the quote universal, spanning time and place?
- How well does the quote reflect the values, strengths, or flaws of the character in the story?
- How well does the quote fit into the development of the story? Is it used to introduce tension, conflict, awareness, compassion, empathy, anger, or another emotion in the story?
- Did the quote alter or reinforce your perceptions in any way?

### General Questions

If your book club prefers, use the following generic questions for discussion.

- Why was this book selected? Was it the theme, subject matter, author that was of most interest to you?
- Were you immediately drawn into the story? Why or why not?
- Some may categorize *Blackhorse Road* as a coming-of-age story. But what is the true subject of the story? What is happening below the surface? What feelings, ideas, and meanings are being explored?
- What is the commonality or universality of the lived experiences in *Blackhorse Road*? Were these presented realistically and believably?
- Are there characters you particularly liked or disliked? What values, strengths, flaws, or characteristics brought you to your opinion? What emotional response (love, hate, anger, sympathy, empathy) did you have for the character(s)?
- The author uses several techniques for storytelling, including flashbacks, written letters, internal dialog, journals/diaries. How effective were these techniques?
- What questions about the story or character haunt you? What mysteries remain unanswered?

- After turning the last page, what was your immediate reaction?

### Quotes

Sam—Chapter 6: “Given the relevant facts and the chance to think things through, most people are smart, creative, and resourceful enough to make the right decisions.”

Sam—Chapter 7: “Energy wasted on the past doesn’t produce much for the future.”

Connor—Chapter 8: “Time and place shape a person.”

Sam—Chapter 9: “Pull the cinch too tight and the horse bucks.”

Sam—Chapter 10: “Don’t make snap decisions, good or bad, about someone. Before forming an opinion, figure out what makes a person tick.”

Sam—Chapter 10: “Understanding what motivates people,” Sam always stressed, “is a circular process. Listen to what people have to say, observe their behaviors, and ask them questions, and repeat these steps again and again.”

Connor—Chapter 10: “If you don’t know people’s experiences and what they are thinking and why, you can never learn how they feel or what matters to them. To have a real relationship with someone, you have to understand them. To understand them, you have to ask people questions and listen carefully to their answers.”

Luci—Chapter 11: “What I mean is that we shouldn’t spend our energy wondering if hidden messages lurk in unexpected events or if they are random. Isn’t it better to be curious about the event itself rather than the why of it? Explore the novelty and the opportunities that something presents to you?”

Luci—Chapter 12: *In fact, seeing different perspectives helps people increase their knowledge and tolerance. Respecting divergent viewpoints is as vital as having overlapping values in a relationship.*

Sam—Chapter 13: “Using money as the foundation for independence usually won’t save you from your own downfall.”

Sam—Chapter 13: “Life’s a journey. You get to pick the highway, the destination, and transportation. You choose the provisions available on the way. You make the decisions. In the end, you are answerable for your actions, looking out for your best interests, and completing the journey.”

Luci—Chapter 13: “No, Barry Callahan, I wouldn’t allow any boy to steal my heart, including you. I will only give it freely to the one I genuinely love.”

Sam—Chapter 14: *Finding a companion to complete oneself is absolute rubbish; people fulfill themselves by being who they are and knowing and leveraging their strengths.*

Luci—Chapter 14: *Relationships are fundamentally based on trust, she reminded herself. Lying to Barry, even with good intentions, is not the path to intimacy.*

Luci—Chapter 14: *Wallowing in self-pity is a waste of energy. Pessimism robs people of their freedom. It closes your mind to possibilities and opportunities. It makes you a victim of your own behavior.*

Chris—Chapter 15: “To be honest, deep inside, I’m afraid. I’d be nuts if I weren’t. But if I allow fear to rule my life, I would sit around like a slug and never feel the joy of experiencing or accomplishing anything.”

Chris—Chapter 15: “There’s that old saying, ‘Better safe than sorry,’ but I like to rephrase it by saying ‘Safe but sorry.’ I think my version is likely more accurate. I don’t want to end my life, Luci, ruminating about all the should-haves or could-haves that I didn’t do because I was afraid.”

Chris—Chapter 15: “I want to be inspired in life—feel love, joy, gratitude, and pride in my accomplishments. These are the things, Luci, that I believe make a person happy.”

Barry—Chapter 15: “If you are going to get what you want in life, you have to have a contingency plan in your back pocket”.

Geneviève—Chapter 16: *If you want to change people’s behavior, it’s best to give them a plausible option.*

Luci—Chapter 16: *What is it between mothers and daughters? What causes toxic behavior and one-upmanship that seems to pass from one era to another? Is it because the earlier generation had fewer opportunities and less freedom than the next? Is that what sets up a clash between what is permissible and impermissible?*

Luci—Chapter 16: Thinking about the phenomenon, Luci wondered if the well-being she observed among her Canadian relations was linked to social interactions that fostered feelings of belonging, acceptance, empathy, and safety.

Geneviève—Chapter 17: “Live in the present, and you won’t be anxious or worried.”

Barry—Chapter 19: *I’ve left the nest. I set and fly my own course now, answerable and responsible for my choices and their results.*

Barry—Chapter 19: *It’s incredible, he thought. The things you can hear if you focus on the present and are curious without judgment: a neighbor’s dog barking, footsteps on the sidewalk, a slight rustling of tree leaves, the lonely sound of a distant car’s engine, the raising of a garage door.*

Geneviève—Chapter 19: *One thing my porch soirees have taught me is that listening and forgoing judgment goes a long way in understanding the core concerns beneath a person’s words.*

Geneviève—Chapter 19: “Because some group or government bans a book, dear, doesn’t mean its material has nothing valuable to teach us. Make no mistake, Ma Bichette, governments and narrow-minded groups ban the content of books because it challenges and teaches people something important. Banned books are bold and provocative and confront issues that certain segments of the population want to sweep under the carpet.”

Barry—Chapter 19: *Being “in love” is a passion like the flames of a blistering fire that race across the prairie. It’s fierce and red, self-serving and out of control. It feeds upon itself until there is nothing left. “To love,” though, is a passion like the embers of a flickering fire that lingers within the hearth. It’s gentle and glowing, crackles with surprise, and slowly permeates the senses. It’s warm and steady. It rekindles itself, and it endures.*

Sam—Chapter 19: “Ask questions or tell a story that opens up a person’s imagination to see options. Remember the best advice giver always bundled his guidance in a parable.”

Luci—Chapter 20: *In the end, what does life boil down to?*

Luci—Chapter 20: *Respect and caring are emotions that last forever*, Luci mused as the memories of her connection with Brian warmed her heart.

Luci—Chapter 20: *Time marches on and changes things, but it cannot eradicate the imprint of energy stamped on a place. Energy does not die. Its vibration, perhaps redistributed, continues. Memories are similar. They do not die; they are waves that echo throughout a lifetime.*

Luci—Chapter 21: *Life’s more than a dot-to-dot picture experience.*

Sean—Chapter 21: “To place a sentence on a person for choosing an action without evaluating the conditions surrounding it is absurd and arbitrary.”

Paul—Chapter 21: “The act of blind obedience to rules is the graver sin than the challenge to them. Acting in fear of or to please an external entity isn’t being moral.”

Sean—Chapter 21: “Law and morality aren’t necessarily the same.”

Chris—Chapter 21: “You cannot contract out responsibility for exercising your conscience to religion, government, or other authority. To mindlessly follow authority thwarts one’s autonomy. After all is said and done, you are accountable for your choices. Those who believe that following the rules will excuse them from moral responsibility are living in fantasy land.”

Adele—Chapter 21: Don’t we have to understand what made her tick, if only for ourselves so we don’t propagate the insanity? Don’t we have to reclaim our lives from this sickness of resentment?

Shelia—Chapter 22: “With Chuck, I ditched the what-ifs and sidestepped the anger and angst. I didn’t allow self-pity, second-guessing, or rage to overshadow my life . . . Every day, I found something to be grateful for: my health, my children, my friends, a sunny day. I concentrated on good things. I believed that a happy future was something I could create in the present.”

Luci—Chapter 22: *No, it isn’t anger or denial. It’s a web of self-blame and guilt I’ve constructed around me . . .* “My finger has been pressed on the ruminating button trying to shine a light on what went wrong, and it’s driven me nuts. I’ve let my inner critic, Doris, live in my psyche and pop up whenever she damned pleased, admonishing me with ‘What did you do?’ and laying a guilt trip on me.”

Shelia—Chapter 22: “Resolving the unknown is not under your control, but you can control the guilt trip and stop it in its tracks. Substitute *bad me* by thinking *lucky me*.”

Shelia—Chapter 22: “Putting trust in the past that things might have been better or easier if only this or that had happened is fooling yourself. And, putting faith in the future, hoping to find a better life without making the present as fulfilled as possible, is cheating yourself.”

Shelia—Chapter 22: “I pity those who give up their autonomy or cave into adversity because they think fulfillment will materialize out of thin air in the future or in an afterlife,” Shelia asserted. “I made a choice eighteen years ago, and I assumed accountability for my actions. If I concentrate on living a good

life every day, I don't have to rely on hoping whether I have enough brownie points at the end of it. The life I'm leading now, today, is fulfillment enough."

Luci—Chapter 22: "I can't help wondering if there is a connection between having a purpose in life and general well-being and even health. What do you think?"

Sam—Chapter 22: "Lead a virtuous life, and you'll never be uncertain of your next step. You won't have to question or second-guess your motives. You will be free."

Luci—Chapter 25: *I want to live in the present with an open heart so that it fills with gratitude, kindness, and love.*

Chris—Chapter 25: "The truth, Luci, is that love and caring don't subside."

Chris—Chapter 25: "It's not a fleeting pleasure that creates happiness or meaningful memories. Instead, it is choosing to use one's strengths and experiences in worthwhile work and engagement with the people you love,"

Pat—Chapter 26: "You are creative, resourceful, and whole, Luci. You are capable of finding the answers; you can make the choices and take the actions you decide on."

Pat—Chapter 26: "If you had no fear, what would you do?"

Barry—Chapter 26: *But how could I possibly be happy if you are not? You always spoke about choices. I could put my ego first and try to prove the relationship was right and to continue pestering you. I could choose to be angry and place blame on myself or on you. Those are things I do not choose to do . . . I am reminded that you always said living in the present helps us opens our hearts so we have room for gratitude, kindness, and love.*

Luci—Chapter 27: *How can people be resilient and healthy if they embrace emotions of unforgiveness that trigger stress?*

Luci—Chapter 27: *What is forgiveness? I don't know yet. It is as arduous to catch as an elusive fairy.*

Luci—Chapter 27: *Tonight, I am thankful I've made the decision to forgive my Mother's transgressions because it's a step toward autonomy. I know deciding to forgive is just the beginning of the journey. For real forgiveness, I must follow the forgiveness fairies and the pathway to self-awareness and compassion.*

Luci—Chapter 27: *I keep asking myself what is forgiveness? Forgiveness is not pardoning. It is not overlooking or justifying my mother's transgression and the hurt her actions caused. I am relieved that I don't have to condone or excuse, reconcile, or even forget her behavior to forgive her. What is forgiveness? The nuggets were there all the time in Barry's last letter; forgiveness is choosing of one's accord to reject resentment and embrace compassion.*