

Doby Wolf

A novel by R. M. Hiland

Reading-Group Guide

Spoiler alert. These questions are for after you've read the book. Several of them talk about how it ends.

Fifteen questions for a ninety-minute conversation. The diamond ◆ marks a question the book does not answer. There are a lot of them, and that is on purpose.

To open with

A. Which character did you trust first? Did that change?

B. Have you ever known an animal the way Doby knows them — well enough to tell the day something is wrong before there's anything to point at?

C. Doby's family has farmed the same ground for generations. What place do you know that well, and what would you notice about it that a visitor wouldn't?

D. Was there a moment where you thought *this book is not going where I assumed*? Where was it?

---

1. ◆ The book opens with a girl named Dorothy in Kansas, wondering *"what goes on out there in the big dark nothing,"* and signing off with a sarcastic *"Oh, my."* Two pages later a harrier lands in the cottonwood and studies her: *"I could feel her eyes on me, going through me, all the way down into the heart of me."* Turn the page and Ant has been watching the same three minutes from the four-wheeler. *"Her eyes were huge and shining. Like she saw an angel or something. Or was on drugs."* Then the field-guide reading: *"hungry hawks do that. Fix their next*

meal with that hypnotic stare to freeze them in place." **You get her account and his back to back, before you know anything else about either of them. Which one did you take? Did the book ever make you choose?**

On the town

2. ◆ Cal Dressler makes slides for a crisis three months old — town seal in the corner, clean fonts, *proactive management* four times in fifteen minutes — and never mentions the sick children or the lab samples. **Is leaving something out the same as lying?** Would your slides have been different?

3. At the kitchen table he says: *"I did the cheap thing in June, and it put two boil orders on a town with sick kids in it, and I have got a woman dead in a fire I made a slide about."* What did it cost him to say that in somebody else's yard? **Does the book forgive him — and did you?**

4. ◆ Dressler says he can hold the number down. Jakob answers: *"You can. And it buys you a summer in front of a judge, and they drink it boiled the whole time."* Then: *"You're not buying it from me, Cal. You're buying it for them. Squeeze me and they pay for it."* He has the town over a barrel and says so out loud — and the cost he names is not one that lands in his own pocket. **Is that a hard bargain? How would you have handled it?**

On seeing

5. Ant plays at the bonfire with nobody listening, and the room goes quiet anyway. His father stands out past the firelight where he can hear and not be seen. **Who is Ant playing for?**

On the land and the water

6. Jakob put the pivot in ten years ago and told his daughter what it was for: *"Got to pay for you and Anton's college somehow."* She argued the aquifer with him when she was eleven and she is still arguing it. Ten years on, the thing that actually funds her is a different deal altogether: *"Corn bought forward, water arrangement formalized… Doby's funded. First two years at least."* The corn that quarter was built to grow is lost, the pivot runs to supply the town and is then capped. **The pivot drew the water down and selling the water paid the tuition. What would you have done, with two children and that ground?**

7. ◆ Doby has the slow disaster in her head early: *"The water table dropping three feet a year. The pivot sucking and sucking and sucking."* Nobody calls a meeting about that. Then Edna Schroeder dies, and there is *"the black rectangle on County Road 14,"* and a town on boil orders, and water is suddenly the only thing anyone can talk about. **Which is more dangerous — the catastrophe everyone can see, or the slow loss everyone learns to live with?**

8. ◆ Lucy lifts the lid off a rain barrel that isn't hers and says *"May I?"* — and she asks Doby, not the man standing right there who owns it, who makes a sound of protest. Fifty years earlier Herman Veil finished the well log, and then added a line under the last official column in the smallest hand he had: *"She's down there. Be good to her."* One is asking before taking. The other is a man who has already taken, leaving an instruction for whoever comes next. **Are they the same thing? Which one is harder to do? And does that obligation stop at water?**

On the people

9. Ike goes over Lan Thi's planted border and straight across her labyrinth — *"One long stride over the planted border… Eight careful steps to the center"* — and she smiles at him. Years before, in Hue, Thanh did the same thing: *"He walked straight to the center. Didn't follow the path. Stepped over three hedges."* She was furious. She married him six months later. **Make the case for Ike. Then make the case for Lan Thi's husband.**

10. ◆ With Rosy down, Doby does the whole thing alone: *"reciprocity and what that actually meant when you were sitting in a barn in August with a sick horse and no script and no teacher in the room."* Then the admission — *"I can't do this alone"* — and then she does it anyway. **Where does what she knows come from? Did Lucy teach her something new, give her permission to use what she already had, or is it from somewhere else altogether?**

11. Ant calls it an age problem — *"the particular ache of being seventeen and knowing something is true and rich and valuable and knowing equally well it is not yours to have."* But Lucy has walked three hundred miles to find out who she is, and it only arrives on her face at the Freight House: *"the pilgrim's face at the moment she recognizes what she's been walking toward."* **Is age actually what's in the way? And what does this ask each of them to give up?**

On what gets handed down

12. ◆ Ant lays out what the organic transition will cost: *"you farm to their rules and you sell at everybody else's price until the paper comes."* Jakob listens, and then says the thing underneath it: *"Your grandfather farmed that quarter without a drop of pumped water."* Jakob put the pivot in himself. Losing the water puts that quarter back the way his father worked it. **What has this family actually handed down — the ground, or a way of working it?**

13. ◆ Jakob says the important thing on his way out of the barn, with his back turned and the flashlight already in his hand: *"Whatever you decide about the farm… don't lose the music. That would be a waste I couldn't forgive myself for."* Months later, in the truck, it has compressed to two words — *"The music,"* not looking at him. At the bonfire it isn't words at all: he stands off past the firelight and smiles and doesn't know he is doing it, and Ant never sees it. **Everything this father has to say about his son's music he says with his face turned away. Is that a failure?**

On what is left open

14. ◆ Doby gives her father the blackbird carving *"without explanation."* He *"held it in both hands the way you held a thing you didn't have words for yet. Didn't ask."* Then he carries it inside and sets it on the windowsill above the kitchen sink *"where the morning light would find it."* **Jakob never says what he thinks it is, and never asks. He just puts it where the light will find it every morning. Is that belief? Does the book need it to be?**

15. ◆ Ant couldn't get his R's and B's out straight as a small boy, and that is where "Doby" comes from — the name in the book's first sentence is a child's mistake that everybody kept. He found his way to music instead. Doby learns from the harrier, from Rosy, from the blackbirds. Lucy arrives to teach and gets taught. Mary teaches them all and leaves. **What does Doby learn from the animals that no person in this book tells her?**

Before you close

◆ **Who in this book tends something? Who fails to? And is neglect in *Doby Wolf* more consequential than deliberate wrongdoing?**

The novel does not propose that attention makes a thing aware. The something under the aquifer had been awake for ten thousand years and tending the grass from underneath the whole time, and it went on being awake through fifty years of plowing while nobody was listening at all. What attention changes is which side of the conversation gets answered. If your group still has appetite, argue for it — then argue against it.
