

Cabby Potts, Duchess of Dirt
Discussion Questions

Exploring the Characters:

1. Throughout the book, Cabby feels that her Ma is unfairly harsh with her. Do you agree? Did you like the way their relationship resolves at the end?
2. What do you admire about Cabby? What are her flaws?
3. Do you think Cabby and Eli will go on to be friends—or maybe more than friends? What stands in their way?
4. What do you learn about Mr. and Mrs. Shaw as the story goes along? How does this influence your perspective of them? How do they fit into the class system of the book?
5. How does Cabby’s relationship with Lady Ashford evolve during the story? Do you think Lady Ashford truly changes?

The Historical Context:

1. At the end of the book, the sound of distant thunder reminds Cabby of the rumble of buffalo hooves. What happened to the buffalo on the prairies of Kansas? What are the implications of their extinction?
2. The Prince Albert settlement in the book is based on the real town of Victoria, which was founded by Sir George Grant in 1872 as a “community of culture and refinement” for the sons of the nobility. It attracted two hundred British settlers. By 1876, though, only a handful remained. In 1878, George Grant died, and the community was dissolved, those who remained moving to a nearby city. The area was absorbed into Herzog, a settlement of German-speaking Russian immigrants. Are you surprised by this outcome?
3. How does Eli’s family history intersect with the story of settlement of the Great Plains? Did you learn anything new about the Native American tribes who once travelled across Kansas?
4. According to Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher in *The American West: A New Interpretive History*, shady land-grabbing practices were not unusual in states where homesteading was available. The railroads often owned the most desirable land, and speculators grabbed up the most likely town sites as well as stretches of land along streams or roads. The sections available to homesteaders were often the most remote or least desirable. In addition, fraud was rampant, as speculators sought to acquire land they could sell at a profit. “Dummy” homestead claims became standing jokes. Hired by speculators, people set up shacks on quarter-sections, paid the minimum cash price

after six months, then signed the deed over to their employers. Houses on wheels were even moved from claim to claim.

Were you surprised to learn about these practices?

Themes and Symbolism:

1. When Cabby describes herself, she says, "Pa said I was pretty as a Kansas sunflower." Then she adds, "but a sunflower was basically a weed." Later, when describing the crowds on the Fourth of July, Cabby says, "The Prince Albert folks mixed into the crowd . . . stood out like lilies in a field of Kansas sunflowers, the men in linen jackets and the ladies in summer dresses gathered into fashionable bustles." Another mention of sunflowers comes when Cabby describes how the July sun has burned up the prairie grasses: "Only the sunflowers blooming along the side of the road," she says, "seemed to like the heat, turning their bright faces toward the sky."

What do you think sunflowers symbolize in the book?

2. Cabby realizes that the brooch she wears is probably not very expensive: the metal is just pewter, and the stone is just glass. Why does the brooch mean so much to her? What does it symbolize in the story?
3. At one point early in the book, Cabby tells Emmeline, "This is real life, not stories." Does Cabby have a more realistic perspective on things than Emmeline? Or does she also have her vision clouded by stories?
4. One of the themes in *Cabby Potts, Duchess of Dirt* is "arithmetic." For example, when Cabby first develops the "brilliant inspiration" that Nigel must marry Emmeline, she calls it "a triumph of true love and arithmetic." Later, when she begins to realize she doesn't really like Nigel, she scolds herself: "Arithmetic, Cabby. Remember the arithmetic." What does Cabby mean by "arithmetic"? How does her attitude toward arithmetic change in the story?
5. When readers see things that characters themselves don't see, this is called dramatic irony. At what point in the story did you see what Cabby doesn't see?
 - About Knee-High Meacham
 - About Nigel Ashford