

# A Reading and Discussion Guide

## ***The Crops Look Good: News from a Midwestern Family Farm***

by Sara DeLuca



### **Book Summary:**

Affectionate without being overly sentimental, this intimate biography of a Wisconsin farm family eloquently chronicles a past way of life, one which, though arguably simpler, was not necessarily easier. Letters between mother and daughter, between sisters, between husband and wife, are filled with lively details. The tale that emerges is one of fierce devotion to family and work, of a changing landscape as smaller farms became part of conglomerates, and of the comforting daily rhythms of life shared with those who know us best.

1. In her prologue, the author states that the setting deserves a starring role in this story. In what respect do the Williamsons represent the midwestern family farming culture in the first half of the past century? In what ways might this family be considered unique?
2. The social and economic interdependence of rural neighbors is illustrated throughout this story. What twentieth-century developments have contributed to the breakdown of such ties? Conversely, how can the benefits of modern transportation and communication enlarge and enhance our sense of community?
3. The narrator does not offer lengthy descriptions of Olava Williamson and her four daughters but allows them to reveal themselves through their own writings. How would you characterize these five women? What do you discern about their individual personalities? How did these traits influence their choices and affect their lives?
4. Which of these letter writers do you most admire and why?
5. With the exception of Raymond's letters to Margaret, written prior to his marriage, the Williamson family correspondence was conducted primarily by the women. Why do you think women have so often been the writers and keepers of personal and family history, while men are generally credited with recording the public history, the "big" stories of our collective past?
6. What do the Williamson letters reveal about the role of rural women during the first half of the last century? What shifts in gender roles were becoming apparent after World War II? How might the migration from rural areas to cities and suburbs have contributed to these changes?
7. How did Olava express her frustration with the isolation and drudgery of farm life? Do you think her girlhood exposure to the Pillsbury family's wealthy lifestyle contributed to her discontentment?



8. How did Margaret's move to California change the way she viewed life on the "homeplace"? How did her move to this distant and very different place affect her and her Wisconsin family?

9. Compare the child-rearing attitudes and practices revealed in this story with those of the present time. In what ways are these changes positive, preparing children to become mature and productive adults? What negative comparisons would you make?



10. What is your impression of the quality of education that the Williamson children received in their one-room country schoolhouse? Do you think most children today can write as well as Helen did at a young age? What do you admire about the letters written by Helen and her siblings as adults?



11. Discuss the quality and availability of health care in rural America prior to World War II. What tragedies and suffering portrayed in this story might have been averted if antibiotics and other medical and psychiatric treatment options had been available?

12. What "World of Tomorrow" predictions from the 1939 New York World's Fair have missed the mark? Which ones have proven to be accurate?

13. What changes did the Williamson family try to resist during the 1920s through the 1950s? Which new developments did they embrace?

14. Major scientific, technological, and chemical advances have dramatically increased farm production over the past century. What benefits have been realized from these changes? What are some negative effects of modern farming methods?



15. It seems that basic human nature remains remarkably constant, regardless of time and place. What major personal and societal issues do we have in common with the people portrayed in this story?

16. Writing personal letters to express and share our daily accomplishments, hopes, plans, sorrows, frustrations, and reflections on the world we live in has largely become a lost art. What might this loss mean to future historians? What is the loss to individuals and society as a whole?

17. How does digital communication compare with the handwritten letter? What are some advantages of today's fast, efficient means of self-expression and keeping in touch with friends and family?

## About the author:

Poet and writer **Sara DeLuca** grew up on a dairy and sheep farm near the Williamson "homeplace" in Polk County, Wisconsin. She is the author of the memoir *Dancing the Cows Home* and the poetry collection *Shearing Time*.

