

# Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

## GIANTS IN THE EARTH

by O. E. Rolvaag

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- What kind of personality typified settlers?
  - Why do you think Rolvaag published this book in Norwegian, even though he lived and wrote in the United States?
  - What role did the weather play in this novel?
  - If the Per Hansa family had not been separated from the others, would Beret have been all right?
  - Who is the main character in this novel?
  - What is the meaning of the title?
  - In Rolvaag's autobiographical first novel, *The Third Life of Per Smelvik*, he explores the themes of immigrants' inner conflict between the desire to return to the old world and their goal of the American Dream. Is that reflected in this novel?
  - Rolvaag was adamant that becoming an American did not mean giving up one's cultural heritage. He supported the theory of cultural pluralism in which different ethnic cultures would live side by side in harmony. How was this theory depicted in the novel?
  - Rolvaag was deeply affected by personal tragedy—his son drowned. Afterward, he wrote that the death “changed my entire view of life ... I had looked upon God as a logical mind in whom the least happening in this and other worlds was planned and willed. Gradually, I began to see that much of what takes place is due chance and to law bound nature.” In what way is this feeling reflected in *Giants in the Earth*?
  - Should Beret have come to America in the first place? Did she have a choice?
  - *Giants in the Earth* seems to be filled with the psychological realism of the Western Movement



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and the impact on the psychic state of the immigrants. How is this evident?

- When Per Hansa whitewashed the interior walls of their home, Beret seemed happier at first and then fearful again. Why?
- How did the arrival of the minister affect the community in general? Beret in particular?
- How did Per and Beret differ?
- Why did Rolvaag include the scene of the couple wandering after the death of their child?
- Did Per Hansa suffer from the sin of pride?
- What is the role of the prairie itself?
- Was the ending preordained?
- Being so farsighted in the rest of the book, why did Per Hansa set off in the storm at the end?
- When does the communal efforts of a settlement give way to entrepreneurship?