

## Discussion Questions for *Over the Plain Houses* by Julia Franks

1. Brodis seems to love his son, but there's a great deal of tension in their relationship. What are the causes of that tension? Do you think he's a good father?
2. In Chapter 3, Brodis lectures Matthew after he questions the Bible, saying "Comes a point where a man can't tell the difference between a bending and a breaking." What does Brodis mean? Do you agree?
3. Brodis commits terrible acts, but did you sympathize with him at all? At what point did you stop sympathizing with him? To what extent can you identify with him? What are his motivations? His frustrations?
4. What is it that Irenie seems to want out of life and how does it change as the story progresses?
5. Is she a good mother?
6. How would you characterize the friendship between Irenie and Virginia? How do they influence one another? Why is theirs a rather unlikely friendship?
7. The only other couple we see in any detail are Irenie's parents. At one point, she explicitly compares her marriage to theirs. What are the differences?
8. When Irenie goes to Copper Hill, Dr. Potts asks her several questions about her married life before he makes a decision to go ahead with the procedure. Do you think his role here is appropriate?
9. *Over the Plain Houses* has been called a novel about witchcraft. To what extent is that true? Are there characters who practice magic spells? Who and to what effect?
10. The US Department of Agriculture is the most obvious agent of change in the novel. To what extent is the change it brings positive or negative?
11. What are the other agents of progress and change?
12. Many novels use multiple points of view to highlight miscommunication. What are the central misunderstandings in this story?
13. In some ways the novel is about certainty versus doubt. Matthew questions the Bible and his parents, Irenie questions her husband, her world, and herself. Brodis, on the other hand, is in search of certainty, so much so that he swears off the "rabbit trap questions" that his own mind conjures up. What does the novel seem to be saying about the role of doubt and certainty?

14. Are there other characters in the novel beside Brodis who are motivated by ideology? How do their ideological certainties compare to Brodis's?
15. Brodis "drowns" three times in the novel, each time with a different consequence. How does each experience affect him?
16. Many have said that the natural world in this novel is a character unto itself. If that is so, what does Nature have to endure in this novel? To what extent is Nature diminished or triumphant in the end?
17. How does Brodis justify his final act of violence? To what extent is it an act of warning? An act of vengeance? Are there modern parallels?
18. Is it possible to separate Brodis' personal motivation from his ideological ones?
19. Who changes the most throughout the novel, Irenie or Brodis? Would you characterize the change as "growth"?
20. What are some recurring symbols in *Over the Plain Houses*?
21. *Over the Plain Houses* opens with a poem by Anne Sexton, "Our Kind." Now that you've read the novel, how does the poem inform the novel?
22. The novel ends with Matthew successfully enrolled in a boarding school. What do you think his future life will be?
23. And Irenie's?