

1. *Tomato Girl* is written in the Southern Gothic tradition, which is known for its grotesqueries as well as its damaged and delusional characters. Unlike the Gothic novel, which uses similar techniques to build suspense, the purpose of the Southern Gothic novel is to make a social statement or shed light on some aspect of our culture. Discuss the ways that *Tomato Girl* fits the Southern Gothic tradition. What specific statements does the novel make about societal issues?

2. Ellie Sanders suffers tremendous burdens and losses for a young girl. Of the three main people in Ellie's life—Julia, Rupert, Tess—who contributes most to her suffering and why? If you could eliminate one character in the story to reduce or eliminate Ellie's stress and suffering, which character would you choose and why?

3. What role does the character of Mary Roberts play in the novel and in Ellie's life? Why do you think Ellie and Mary are best friends when they appear to be so different? Do you believe their friendship will continue? Why or why not?

4. Mary warns Ellie to avoid Clara, the African American clairvoyant who befriends her. Ellie says, "Mary doesn't understand that when you need somebody the way I need Clara, you don't care two sticks what color skin they live in" (page 4). Discuss the role of race and how it impacts the relationships in the novel.

5. When Tess drops Ellie's chick, Jellybean, into the river, she says it was accidental. Do you believe it was accidental or intentional? How do you think Tess feels about Ellie? How do Ellie's feelings about Tess evolve over the course of the novel? Once Tess comes to live in the Sanders's household, are Ellie's reactions against Tess justified?

6. Given the public's increased awareness and acknowledgment of mental illness and sexual abuse, would any of the characters' circumstances have played out any differently if the novel had been set in the present day? Do you think Ellie's story would be different if it took place in a large city?

7. What do you think draws Rupert Sanders into his relationship with Tess? Julia and Tess both have considerable needs. What does this say about Rupert's personality? Given the choices that Rupert makes, why does he come across as somewhat sympathetic?

8. What do you think of the way Rupert has responded to Julia's depression before Tess is introduced? What do you think of the way he handles Julia and Ellie after Tess comes to live with them?

9. Discuss Ellie's understanding of God as demonstrated by her God promises. How does she grapple with the question of a loving God allowing so much suffering?

10. *Tomato Girl* is told from the first-person point of view. How would your view of the plot and characters change if the story were told in the third-person? Would it be more or less satisfying for the reader to hear the story from multiple perspectives?

11. Clara comes into Ellie's life after Rupert flees with Tess. How does Clara change the direction of the story? What role does Clara's magic play in Ellie's healing?

12. Discuss the role and symbolism of Baby Tom. What does he represent to each of the characters?

13. Ellie's parents put their own needs before Ellie's, and in doing so fail to keep her safe. What role does the community play in saving Ellie? Discuss the ways community can intervene to save a child when the family proves unable to provide care.

14. Ellie uses a make-believe door to escape from her pain. Why does Clara insist that Ellie let go of the magic door? What does it mean when Ellie releases the chalk sticks into the river?

15. Ellie makes the statement "I've heard Mama say there is nothing more disappointing than an ordinary life, but I don't know. Sometimes an ordinary life is what I want most in the world" (page 43). Do you have the sense at the end of the novel that Ellie may one day get her wish for an ordinary life? Why or why not?