

Discussion questions for **Hannah Coulter** by Wendell Berry

1. Hannah Coulter is a story of a woman's life and lifetime told by a man, Wendell Berry. Does the author do a credible job of writing from a woman's perspective and with a woman's language?
2. Consider Hannah's Granmam, Mrs. Feltner and the other women of Port William. What are the women described in Hannah Coulter like? Would you call them "liberated"? Realistic?
3. Describe the concept of "the membership." Do you have a reliable person or group you can go to for help when you need it? Do you offer your services to anyone?
4. How does Hannah describe her marriages? Does her description of marriage seem modern or old-fashioned? Realistic?
5. Hannah says in the book "The stream and the woods don't care if you love them. The place doesn't care if you love it. But for your own sake you had better love it. For the sake of all else you love, you had better love it." Place is very important in all of Wendell Berry's novels. His characters are very grounded in their community. Does this lifestyle still exist anywhere in our country? Has our community lost anything by being so mobile and disconnected?
6. Hannah describes her sadness that each of her children left the farm and community. She largely blames their education for taking them away. Do you agree? Were there other forces at work?
7. Why does Nathan refuse to talk about the war? What did Hannah learn in her research about the Battle of Okinawa and the war in the Pacific? What role does religion play in the novel?
8. Why does Burley refuse to buy a tractor? Are the old ways better or is he being foolish?
9. Is Berry overly sentimental about a disappearing way of life?
10. How accepting of illegal immigrants or drug dealers would the Port William community be?
11. Several recent bestselling non-fiction books such as Omnivore's Dilemma, In Defense of Food and Animal, Vegetable, Miracle encourage readers to consider a more sustainable lifestyle, including sustainable farming. Is the lifestyle described in Hannah Coulter more morally defensible than suburban or urban living? Do Berry's writings describe a lifestyle of the past or a lifestyle of the future?
12. Wendell Berry is known, among other things, for promoting sustainable agriculture, environmentalism, and conservation, or minimizing one's impact on the environment. How does he communicate his ideals through Hannah's voice?
13. What did you find to be the most surprising thing about this novel? Did it challenge your thinking? Did it make you long for a by-gone era of rural life? Do you think Wendell Berry's portrayal of rural life is more realistic or idealistic?