

Discussion Questions for *Somewhere and Nowhere*

1. In the prologue, the narrator describes a goal of finding “a happiness that would last.” Does her trip achieve this goal? In what ways do you think she succeeds and/or fails?
2. The narrator’s parents do not want her to go on the trip. Is she wrong to go? Can you relate as a parent or as a child? How would you feel about your child making such a journey?
3. The narrator describes a motto of the trip, “Let’s just wait and see.” Do you like to plan ahead, or to go forward without a plan? What are the advantages of each? How can you balance the two?
4. The characters sleep in many different places during their first two weeks on the road, motivated by their tight budget. What do you think of these places—would you want to sleep in any of them? How does their self-imposed restriction of finding a free place to sleep add to or detract from their experience?
5. Riding a bicycle means being out in the weather. What weather conditions do the characters experience? How does the weather affect them and their story?
6. Early in the trip, the narrator describes being scared in the tent at night, but these fears dissipate as the trip gets underway. Why do you think the characters are able to travel and sleep outside without being scared?
7. The narrator recognizes that worrying ruins many of her experiences. She writes, “Worrying accomplished nothing... It was just a series of thoughts about what might happen, all of it bad.” But it is hard for her to stop worrying, even when she’s aware that she wants to. Are you prone to worry? Why is it hard to stop?
8. A few times on the trip, Emily and Mary have discussions that clear the air between them. At other times, they don’t support each other as well as they might. How are the two women similar and different, and how does this make them good or bad travel partners? If you were going to make this trip, who would you want to go with, and why?
9. Throughout the book, the narrator includes passages of books she is reading. How do the books tie in to what happens to her on the road? If you were traveling cross-country this way, what books might you bring?
10. The narrator’s attempts to meditate often seem to fail. She begins to think of her practice as “sitting still” because that’s all she can manage to do. Do you have any routines that help you relax or focus? Do you succeed in your practice? What helps you succeed?
11. Many readers consider the narrator to be brave, but she does not see herself that way. What are some different forms that bravery can take? In what ways are you brave?
12. How and why does the characters’ route across America change as the trip progresses? How does the narrator regard the changes? If you were traveling cross-country, what places would be on your itinerary? Do you think those places would be as you imagine?
13. Beginning in Madison, Wisconsin, the narrator describes an “aware” feeling that overcomes her, as if she is “more present in the world than usual.” What do you think causes this feeling? Have you ever experienced a moment like this?
14. One expectation the narrator has for her trip is that it will be fun. What insights does she gain about this expectation? Have you ever let expectations interfere with an experience? What happened? Can expectations add to an experience in a positive way?

15. A major victory for the narrator is realizing that she gets “stuck” in time, hanging on to happy moments instead of moving forward with life. How does the trip help her realize this?
16. What emotions does the narrator experience in the Badlands and the Black Hills? How might the geographies of these locations, and the order in which the narrator visited them, contribute to these emotions? Have you ever felt a spiritual connection with a place? What factors contributed to your connection?
17. The narrator calls Wyoming “the most fun part of the trip.” What factors do you think make Wyoming fun?
18. How does the narrator view the Rocky Mountains when she sets off on the trip? What is her experience when she actually climbs them? Have you ever anticipated a momentous event and had it turn out differently than you expected?
19. Why do the characters decide to bike separate ways on the Bighorn Mountains? What does the narrator gain from the experience of bicycling alone? Have you or would you ever travel alone? What might you like or dislike about it?
20. One beta reader of this book described it to the author as her “search for Ranger McDreamy.” Throughout the trip, the narrator remembers relationships she had at home, and imagines what might happen with men she meets. What does she learn from her encounters on the trip?
21. During the trip, the narrator visits churches and reads books about spirituality. What does she learn about her spiritual beliefs while on the trip? Do you share any of her beliefs? Have you had any spiritual revelations, while traveling or otherwise?
22. Emily and Mary have different attitudes about hitchhiking into Yellowstone. What do you think of their views, and of the notion of waiting or asking for help versus trying to help oneself? Would you ever hitchhike, or pick up a hitchhiker?
23. Toward the end of the trip, the narrator discovers the unlikely mantra of “You threatened Miss Swann.” Have you ever found a mantra that helps you?
24. When the narrator considers the phrases “Somewhere better than here” and “Nowhere better than here,” she realizes that she wants both. What aspects of balance does she identify as goals for her life? Are there areas of your life that could use more balance?
25. How does the narrator feel when she arrives at the Pacific Ocean? How do you think you’d feel at such a moment? Could she have done anything differently, to enjoy the moment more?
26. In the epilogue, the narrator describes an anxiety attack. Why do you think this attack happens at this moment in her life?
27. A main theme that develops throughout *Somewhere and Nowhere* is the idea of living in the present moment. What are some ways this theme manifests in the author’s life during the trip?
28. When writing this book, the author heard a speaker at a conference describe the various shapes a plot can have. The speaker began with a typical hill-shaped plot and then described ever more elaborate shapes, like a comb’s teeth and the spiral of a nautilus shell. A shape clicked in the author’s mind that helped her write the book. What do you think it was?
29. In the Author Notes, the author admits to combining the experiences of the trip with insights she gained afterward. Many of these insights came while writing about the trip. Do you write? How can writing help one become more aware of oneself?