

This diary invites the reader to fall headfirst into the life of fourteen-year-old Joan Skraggs. With her intellect, her appreciation for language, and her tendency for the dramatic, Joan longs for a life of education, culture, and romance. Instead, it's nothing but farm chores from sun up to sun down, plus a houseful of disdainful brothers. When her father prohibits her from going to school, Joan decides that she must run away to seek her fortune.

What she finds is a place as a hired girl in the Rosenbach household, where she changes her name to Janet and passes for eighteen-years-old. Janet an example of early feminism - a young woman yearning for purpose and fulfillment beyond the confines of the home. She was born into a life that didn't allow room for her wonder and spirit, so she went and found a life that did.

Not only is it crucial for Janet to have access to the things she craves - education, beauty, culture - she also must find people who see and understand her. As I was reading this book, I thought about how important it is to find like-minded, sympathetic people. Being one's self is not always easy. There are many pressures from the world telling us to change. Support from those who care about us helps us stay the course. **As you read, you could discuss what it means to Janet when she begins to connect with people who see her for who she really is.**

On the following pages, you will find some suggestions for how your book club meeting might go. Feel free to use whichever of these questions and tips works for you, and substitute as you wish. The best book discussions develop organically as people listen closely and respond to each other.

Munch 'n' Chat, 20-30 minutes

As grown-ups and girls arrive, spend some time catching up. The host family might put out snacks and drinks. When possible, include the girls in the decisions about what to serve and how to set up for the club meeting. Older girls might even have a sense of pride from being totally in charge of setting up and running the meetings.

Ice-Breaker, 10-15 minutes

In pairs or in a casual group setting, discuss diaries. **Who has kept a diary? What kinds of things did you write in it? Who still does keep a diary (or journal)? What purpose does it serve to write down memories of your day?**

Give a few minutes for pairs to discuss. If you'd like, give 5-10 minutes for pairs to share a bit about each other's answers.

Book Discussion, 30 minutes or so

These questions about *The Hired Girl* might help you begin your book talk. Some groups might discuss all of these questions, but many groups will use only one or two questions to get their conversation going. Feel free to write your own discussion questions.

- Why do you think Laura Amy Schlitz decided to write this book in diary format? How might the story have been different if it was written like a typical narrative?
- What do we learn about Joan in the first part of the book, when she's living with her father and brothers at the farm? What does she want? How does she try to make her life better?
- Who cares for Joan in this story? Who tries to help her along or nurture her?
- Joan has to work very hard in the Rosenbachs' home. Is her life any better there than it was in her own home?
- One of the ways Joan/Janet is different from the Rosenbachs is she is Catholic. How does this difference of religion present a problem? What does she do about it?
- By the end of the book, which character is the most important to Joan? Who makes the most difference in her life?
- Is Joan different at the end of the book than at the beginning? How? What parts of her character have stayed the same? Imagine yourself in a few

years' time - what parts of your own character do you think will be unchanged?

Leadership Goals, 15 minutes

For this month's leadership goal, practice being the best and most unique YOU you can be. Spend a little time talking - either at your group meeting or with your grown-up alone - about what you love about yourself. What makes you happy? Is it running, dancing, music, drawing, making art? How can you make those wonderful parts of you an even bigger part of your life? You could make time every day to do things that bring you joy. Play your favorite music nice and loud, dancing and singing along; write poetry; take close-up photographs of spider webs. Whatever those things are, simply doing the things that make you feel happiest and most yourself is a way to be a leader, because others might notice and decide that they'll do the same.

Closing, 5 minutes

Before everyone goes off their separate ways, make sure you've chosen a date for your April meeting. Happy reading.

Further Reading

If you really loved this book, and you'd like to read more books like it, here are some suggestions. If there are other books you would like to recommend, we'd love to hear them! Please share them on our Girls Leadership Book Club Facebook Group, so our community can keep growing our list of great titles.

A Northern Light by Jennifer Donnelly - Sixteen-year-old Mattie Gokey lives in the Adirondack mountains. The year is 1906, and no one expects anything of Mattie except that she'll get married and start a family of her own. Yet, that life holds no excitement for her. Mattie, voracious reader and writer, longs to get an education and explore the world. But, she's not sure if she really has the courage to leave everything and everyone she's ever known.

Wildwing by Emily Whitman - In 1913 England, Addy longs for more than the drudgery that the life of a housemaid offers. One day, she discovers a time travel device in her eccentric employer's locked study, and travels back in time to the 13th century. There, she's mistaken for a fine Lady, set to marry a wealthy Lord. Addy decides she might just stay in the past, where her life is much better than it ever was at home, but romance complicates matters and soon Addy is desperate to return to her own time.