

# A Reading and Discussion Guide

## Children's Literature Winner - 19th Annual Minnesota Book Awards

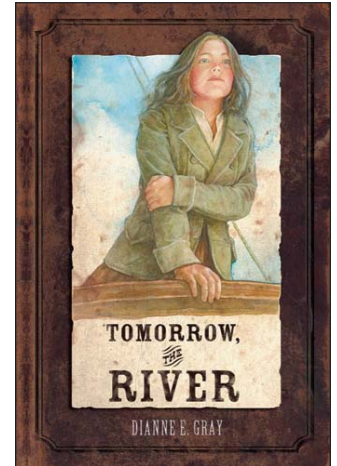
### ***Tomorrow, the River* by Dianne E. Gray**

Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006

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#### **SUMMARY:**

*Tomorrow, the River* is the tale of fourteen-year-old Megan Barnett, who in the late 1800s travels by train from Nebraska to Iowa. There she joins her sister's family on a Mississippi riverboat for a summer of river travel. From the time Megan boards the train, her summer adventure begins with meeting a parade of interesting characters – some of whom are not what they seem. She is relieved to join her sister's family on the riverboat, *Oh My*, but quickly learns that river travel can be fraught with danger – both on the boat and off.



#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. Newspaper articles are scattered throughout the book. Why do you think the author chose to incorporate them? In what ways do they add to and/or detract from your experience in reading the book?
2. Does Megan strike you as a typical fourteen-year-old? Give examples of when she does and/or doesn't.
3. How might Megan's character and story be different if the story took place 100 years later?
4. What is the significance of Megan's interest in photography?
5. What, if anything, surprises you about Megan's relationship with Horace?
6. What clues are given that Doc isn't the person he pretends to be? Have you ever had an encounter or relationship with someone who wasn't what he or she appeared to be?
7. The author confesses that she's very fond of the character Megan but that she's totally in love with the riverboat, *Oh My*. What do you think the boat represents? Why do you think the author is so attached to *Oh My*?
8. In the book Megan asks herself, "Did one make their own luck, or did luck simply happen?" What are your thoughts on this question, both in terms of the book and your own life experiences?
9. As the novel unfolds, Megan learns that many of the rules governing a young woman's behavior, such as wearing long skirts, "sink like rocks when it comes to the river." What other examples of such rules are given in the book? Can you think of rules that exist for young people today that cause similar hindrances?
10. How do you believe Megan's summer of train and river travel adventures changes her?
11. If you had a whole summer to set aside for adventure, where and how would you choose to travel? Would you be open to the kinds of unexpected and sometimes dangerous experiences that Megan encounters?

## A CONVERSATION WITH DIANNE GRAY:

### Q. What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

I have lived in the Mississippi River town of Winona, Minnesota since 1995. One cannot live so close to this great river and not be enthralled, intrigued, and awe-struck by its ever-changing beauty—and its illustrious history! A novel set on the river was inevitable.

### Q. What research did you undertake in writing *Tomorrow, the River*?

This book required an enormous amount of research. Among the topics were riverboat construction, steam powered engines, the pearl button industry, early photography, river navigation, railway travel, 1890s medical practices, upper Mississippi's natural history (birds, fish, etc.), and cultural norms and expectations for young women in the late 1800s.

### Q. What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing the book?

Of my three novels, this is the first one with an adventure theme where the protagonist is on the move through much of the story. The main challenge for me was in the pacing. I had to ask myself, "How much time should Megan spend in any given place before moving on?" and "When and where should the tension peak and resolve?"

### Q. What do you like most about this book?

I'm really fond of Megan, but I'm totally in love with the riverboat, *Oh My*. If I had the money, I'd have her built and then spend my summers plying the waters of the Mississippi River.

### Q. How and when did you first decide you wanted to be a writer?

I first discovered my passion for writing when working on my master's degree at Hamline University. During the course I took from novelist Mary Rockcastle entitled "Writing from the Roots," I wrote a six-page fictional piece about four young women in a prairie meadow. This was for an assignment where we were to write from a place in childhood. Mary read the piece and said, "I think you have the beginnings of a book, a children's

book. Keep writing." By the time I finished the program, I'd written the draft of my first novel.

### Q. What are you planning to write next?

My next writing project will be a new direction for me – contemporary fiction instead of historical. All I will say at this point is that there is a mother, a daughter, and a 1976 Winnebago motor home.

## ABOUT DIANNE GRAY:

Dianne Gray lives with her husband in the Mississippi River town of Winona, Minnesota, the setting which inspired her third novel for young readers – *Tomorrow, the River*. She grew up on the flat plains of rural Nebraska, the setting of her first two novels for young people. Gray discovered her passion for writing as a student in the Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program at Hamline University. In the author's words, she and her husband have two wonderful daughters, two "way cool" sons-in-law, and three charming grandsons.

Gray's other novels are:

*Together Apart*, 2002; and

*Holding Up the Earth*, 2000.

For more information about the author and her work, visit [www.prairievoices.com](http://www.prairievoices.com).



The Minnesota Book Awards is a statewide outreach program of The Friends of the Saint Paul Public Library in partnership with the Office of the Mayor of Saint Paul and the Saint Paul Public Library. Visit us online at [www.thefriends.org](http://www.thefriends.org).

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