



When the English Fall

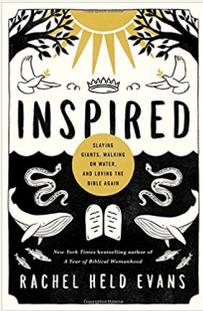
by David Williams

When a catastrophic solar storm brings about the collapse of modern civilization, an Amish community is caught up in the devastating aftermath in this thought-provoking examination of how we live today and what remains if the center cannot hold.

1. A substantial inspiration for the crippling solar storm in the novel is the very real 1859 “Carrington Event.” That equally massive coronal mass ejection was the largest in recent history, and is likely to occur again. If such an event were to take place, what impact would that have on you and the community where you live?
2. In the community Jacob and Hannah fled, Hannah’s loss of her child and subsequent infertility were viewed as divine punishment for an infraction or lack of faith. In a counterpoint to that perspective, the settlement in which Jacob lives approaches major storms—and even the disastrous fall of the English—as events to be faithfully and patiently endured. How does that tension reflect your understanding of human suffering and struggle?
3. In an otherwise bluntly realistic story, Sadie provides the single element of magical realism. How does her character inform the development of the narrative? Does the paranormal or mystic nature of her character mesh with the flow of the story?
4. Early in the book, Jacob is clearly struggling with Sadie’s “illness,” which seems a blending of schizotypal disorders and seizure disorders. In writing about mental illness, it’s easy to romanticize it or approach the struggles of those living with mental illness in ways that don’t show the real impacts on individuals and families. How does the literary treatment of Sadie’s prophetic “peculiarity” play against this dynamic?
5. There is a strong tendency in conventional storytelling to idealize Amish communities, seeing them through a pastel lens that seems to oversimplify their lives. Do Jacob and his family ring true to you?
6. Jacob’s relationship with Mike provides his primary connection with the world of the English. Mike’s struggles—with a dysfunctional family relationship, a diet of endless profitmedia anger, and with his own health—present a very different way of life from the one lived in Jacob’s community. How does this juxtaposition illuminate the differences between our contemporary culture and Amish folkways?
7. As an epistolary novel, the entire book is presented from a single perspective and tone. What are the advantages to this approach to storytelling? What are the limitations or challenges?
8. Jacob’s responses to the crisis he and his community endure are radically shaped by his Christian faith—which, given that he is Amish, should not come as a surprise to the reader. How did his explicit engagement with his faith as he journaled affect your reading?
9. Much of Amish life is oriented around avoiding actions that are hochmut (pride/hubris) and encouraging actions that are demut (humility/selflessness). How does that approach to individual and communal life compare to our culture? What impacts does that ethos have on the decisions made during the course of the novel?

10. For most of the book, the violence and horror remains carefully out of sight, far away from Jacob's community. While this is an intentional choice on the part of the author, how did this affect the development of tension within the story?
11. In his description of his "running-around," or rumspringa, Jacob describes his encounter with our world as "dizzying." Given the explosive pace of technological change and societal self-understanding, do you ever get that feeling yourself?
12. Jacob's father gifted him a pistol. Among the Amish, firearm ownership is common, and guns are used to hunt and slaughter livestock. How do Jacob's reflections on his gun and the ultimately Chekhovian use of that pistol in the story illuminate differences between the Amish and our English culture?
13. Jacob has a complex relationship with Bishop Schrock, whose hardness reminds him of the cold relationship he had with his father's community. How does that relationship evolve in light of the crisis facing their community? How does Jacob's sense of Asa Schrock's identity reflect the ways we project our expectations onto those around us?
14. At several points in the story, Jacob and others share the saying that "the sword has no handle." This reflects the pacifist understanding that cultures based on violence as a means of control ultimately harm themselves. Can a society exist while simultaneously setting aside all forms of coercive power? Why or why not?
15. Faced with the choice of remaining where they are and benefiting from the protection of neighboring militia, or leaving to preserve the integrity of their radically pacifist lifestyle, the Amish in *When the English Fall* choose the latter. How did you react to this decision?
16. The conclusion of the book is ambiguous by design, leaving the ultimate fate of the community open-ended. How do you feel about the choice to end the narrative without a definitive sense of the fate of Jacob and his family?

NEXT MONTH



Inspired

by Rachel Held Evans

Drawing upon recent scholarship and literary analysis, Evans creatively retells our favorite Bible stories and connects them to our present-day ones. Readers are invited to fall in love with Scripture all over again without checking their intellect at the door.