

Discussion Questions

One Book One Nebraska 2026

The Antidote: A Novel
by Karen Russell

(Spoiler alert — these questions assume you've already read the book)

1. If you were to write a headline for a magazine/newspaper review of this book, what would it be. (Keep it to less than ten words.) Here are a few examples to get you started:

- NYT: Amid a dust storm and Depression, pioneers reap what they've sown.
- WaPo: Karen Russell's *The Antidote* is a dazzlingly original American epic.
- Chicago Review of Books: The Plurality of Ideas in Karen Russell's *The Antidote*.
- Guardian: A magical realist Dust Bowl tale.
- Lit Hub: What natural disasters can reveal about the human condition.

2. If the book is full of "plurality of ideas" what do you think are the three main points or themes of *The Antidote*? Can you narrow it down to three easily?

3. In what ways is *The Antidote* "dazzlingly original?"

4. Karen Russell identified four inspirations for the book. Explore examples for each of these inspirations:

- The book of "Job" in the Bible.
- Hole-punched "killed" negatives of photographs taken to show the impact of the Dust Bowl.
- *The Wizard of Oz*
- Stories about the treatment of Indigenous People at the hands of immigrants/pioneers (relocation, Indian Schools, racism)
- Lit Hub: What natural disasters can reveal about the human condition.

5. Prairie witches served as “vaults” for pioneers’ unpleasant memories. Relate this experience to what is happening today in America with school districts removing topics like slavery/treatment of indigenous peoples/climate change from the curricula.

6. In an interview Russell said she used magical realism to tell the Dust Bowl story because it allowed her to be creative and not too tied down to actual facts which could be criticized for accuracy. What magical aspects of the story did you appreciate? What aspects did you find distracting?

7. What memory did Harp recover from his Dad, which was being held by a Prairie Witch? How did this memory expand the story?

8. When Cleo points the Graflex Speed Graphic camera at a scene, the results never show what she is actually photographing. What does this magical camera actually capture? Why do you think Russell included these photos of past memories or future possibilities?

9. How important was the scarecrow to the story? Did you figure out who he was before it was revealed?

10. What aspect of this novel was the most poignant to you?