The Lincoln Highway

by Amor Towles

1. How do you think Emmett, Duchess, Woolly, and Sally’s various upbringings—particularly their relationships to their parents—have shaped them? How have their parents’ choices influenced their own desires and ambitions?
2. Early in the novel, Emmett meets Sister Agnes, a nun who describes the faith of children, who look upon a miracle “with awe and wonder, yes, but without disbelief.” From the context, it’s fairly clear that Sister Agnes is referencing Billy in her remark. How would you describe Billy’s personality? While he is the youngest and least experienced character in the novel, one could argue that he has the greatest influence on other characters. What is it about Billy that makes this so?
3. Throughout the novel, an array of stories are recalled—stories drawn from Professor Abernathe’s Compendium, from the Vaudevillian world of Duchess’s father, from Shakespeare, cinema, and the Bible. What role do stories play in the shaping of the different characters’ lives and personalities?
4. The novel takes place in the mid-1950s. How does the era shape the journeys of the characters, if at all? What aspect of their journeys are unique to their times, and what aspects were shared by you when you were on the verge of adulthood?
5. The tone of each character’s chapters differs from the tone of the other characters’ chapters. How would you describe the style of the different characters’ chapters? To what degree does the style shape your sense of the characters’ personalities?
6. Emmett’s father leaves Emmett a quotation from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” as part of his legacy. Do you agree with Emerson’s argument that what is within the individual is new to nature, and that we have no idea of what we can achieve until we’ve tried? What about Emerson’s idea strikes you as particularly American? What about this novel strikes you as particularly American? What does self-reliance mean to Emmett, to Duchess, and to Sally?
7. There are a number of smaller legacies in the novel. In addition to the Emerson quotation left to Emmett, there are the recipes handed down to Sally, the officer’s watch handed down in the Wolcott family, the St. Christopher medal passed from Billy to Ulysses. What role do these small legacies play within the larger themes of the novel? What smaller legacy have you received that has meant a great deal to you?
8. Given inflation, $50,000 in 1954 would be the equivalent of about $500,000 today. What would you do if you were suddenly given half a million dollars?