News from Heaven EPB

By Jennifer Haigh
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Questions for Discussion

1. What is the significance of the title, *News from Heaven*?

2. Describe the Bakerton, Pennsylvania, that is captured in the pages of *News from Heaven*. What do these stories tell you about this place and the people who were born and raised there?

3. Do you think Bakerton is a typical American small town? How does it reflect American values and the nation's development over the course of the twentieth century, when these stories are set?

4. In Bakerton's heyday, the town proudly erected a sign that described its value: "Bakerton Coal Lights the World." Yet a half century later, the sign has been vandalized to read "Bakerton Coal Blights the World." How does time change the town and the people who live there? Do you think places like Bakerton will rise again?

5. What are the overarching themes that connect the stories and these characters? Choose a particular theme and trace it in an individual character's experience and throughout each of the storis in the book.

6. Some of the characters are desperate to escape Bakerton while others are content to remain. What drives their choices? What makes these people so different from each other? What do we gain—and what do we lose—by either choice? What are the benefits and the drawbacks of living in a place like Bakerton?

7. What means of escape are available to those characters who do leave town? What about those who may have contemplated leaving but have not? Is life harder on those who go—or the loved ones they leave behind? Think about Sandy Novak and his sister Joyce Novak Hauser, or Regina Yahner in the story "Broken Star." What are the consequences of their choices?

8. How did growing up in Bakerton shape various characters? Talk about one or two and use passages from the book to illustrate your argument. How is Bakerton reflected in the lives of those who choose to go? What does it offer those who remain?

9. What is life like in Bakerton for outsiders like Alan Spangler in "Something Sweet"? What connects him to his teacher, Miss Peale? Contrast Alan's experiences with those of Mitch Spanek in "Favorite Son." What does it take to fit in a place like Bakerton?

10. In "A Place in the Sun," Sandy Novak left Bakerton and it's "bleak small-town life worse than jail," for the promise of something better out west. Is the grass truly greener elsewhere? Why? Years later, the woman he loves, Vera Gold, tells his sister Joyce, "Whenever he got into trouble, he figured he'd always have this place to come back to." Could Sandy have ever gone back? Is it possible to "go home" again? What happens to those who do, like Ray in "The Bottom of Things"?

11. Ray had always believed that "there were two kinds of men: men who took advantage of their freedom and men who threw it away; men who lived big lives and men who were content being small." Can you live a big life in a small town? If you choose to stay in Bakerton, is that the same as being "content being small"? What does Ray learn about himself when he visits Bakerton for his parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary? Do you think he can find deliverance embracing the responsibilities he once longed to escape?

12. Talk about your own hometown. If you have revisited, do you hold the same opinions you did when you lived there? How can time and distance alter our outlook? What, ultimately, changes?

13. Did you have a favorite story or character in News of Heaven? Elaborate on your choices.

14. What do the experiences of the characters in *News from Heaven* teach us about ourselves, our home towns, and life itself?

15. The stories in *News from Heaven* are set in the same location as Jennifer Haigh's earlier book Baker Towers, and several characters from that novel—Sandy, Dorothy and George Novak, Viola Peale, Joyce and Ed Hauser—make appearances in *News from Heaven*. If you have read Baker Towers, how do the two books compare? What are some reasons a writer might return to the setting of an earlier book?