

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR
THE LAST TOWN ON EARTH**

General questions involving historical context:

1. World War I serves as the backdrop for the novel. Who was involved in the First World War? Why was it fought? Why was there originally opposition against the war in the United States? Why did the U.S. eventually become involved?
2. What were the United States Government's policies concerning the military draft during World War I? How could the men of Commonwealth avoid military service legally? Why were some individuals in the novel charged with breaking the law by not serving?
3. The following groups are mentioned in The Last Town on Earth. Historically, what were their real functions?
 1. American Protective League (A.P.L.)
 2. Four Minute Men
 3. Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.)
 4. Wobblies
4. What was the Everett Massacre? What role does this event play in the novel?
5. What impact did the H1N1 influenza outbreak that occurred during World War I have upon the world? How was it transmitted? Who was spared? Why? Within the past several years, why has there been so much concern in the world involving the H5N1 virus, commonly known as the "avian flu" or "bird flu"? What measures are being taken by the State of Ohio, and by the Department of Homeland Security, to prepare for this possible epidemic?
6. Throughout recorded history, many groups of people have attempted to create and sustain utopian societies, and every such attempt has eventually failed. What is a "utopian" society and how might Commonwealth, Washington, qualify as being an attempt at such a community? What is a "commonwealth"? What are the reasons Commonwealth was created? How did the quarantine, brought about by the arrival of the flu, ultimately degrade Commonwealth as a community?
7. How did World War I threaten the basic economic ideals upon which Commonwealth was originally founded?

Questions to consider concerning the work as literature:

1. The Last Town on Earth is “historical fiction.” How does this differ from “fiction”?
2. What is the title of the novel? Explain the title’s significance?
3. What is the setting (time and place) of the novel? How does this impact the story?
4. From what perspective is the story told? How does the narrator’s perspective affect the telling of this story?

Questions to consider concerning the story itself:

1. Why did Charles Worthy create Commonwealth? What was the purpose of the community?
2. To what end will the people of Commonwealth go to prevent the influenza virus from entering their community? How do their actions undermine the very nature of their community?
3. Despite their efforts, the influenza virus arrives in Commonwealth. How does this occur despite the town quarantine?
4. How does the arrival of the flu impact Commonwealth: the people, the businesses, the individual members of the community?
5. Consider how several of the central characters’ lives are affected due to the arrival of the flu and the quarantining of Commonwealth. What were the dreams of each of these individuals prior to the arrival of the influenza virus and how might Commonwealth have originally seemed to promise one clear path toward realizing those dreams?
 1. Charles Worthy
 2. Rebecca Worthy
 3. Philip Worthy
 4. Graham Stone
 5. Doc Banes
 6. The Metzgers
6. What role does superstition play in the novel, especially as it is related to the arrival of, and people’s measures against contracting, the flu? Have superstitions ever affected the manner in which you reacted to something? How? Explain.

7. One of the great moments of tension in the novel is when Philip kisses Elsie, despite the fact that he is unsure if he or Elsie is infected with the flu virus. Was this wise? Why do you believe they took such a risk?
8. Graham Stone changes as a person throughout the novel. Explain who Graham is at the beginning, middle, and conclusion of the work. What major events in Graham's life do you believe contribute to his evolution?
9. How might one examine the novel as a "coming of age" story? Consider Philip Worthy as you address this question.
10. A prominent theme in the novel is "beginning one's life anew after experiencing some trauma or loss." Explain how the author deals with this theme in the novel.

Values-oriented questions:

1. Define "value." What does Graham Stone value in the novel? How does this impact his decision to shoot and kill the first soldier? What might you have done, given the same circumstances?
2. Was Philip Worthy right to offer the second soldier, Frank Summers, food and shelter, rather than to keep him from nearing the town? Why? Why not? What if Frank had been infected with the influenza virus? Would you have permitted Frank to enter the town?
3. On p. 287 of the novel the narrator writes, "It had occurred to Philip that every decision made by the town since the quarantine began had been somewhat selfish. They'd placed themselves on a pedestal above all outsiders, holding their value to be superior on pain of death. It seemed wrong, even when placed against the vision of Philip's own family falling ill."

Do you hold the same position? Was it wrong for the people of Commonwealth to quarantine themselves against potential exposure to the flu virus, despite the manner in which it undermined the original philosophy of the town?

4. Philip is greatly disturbed by the killing of the first soldier, but, near the conclusion of the novel, Philip shoots someone himself. Who does Philip kill? What is the difference between the killings? How might you paint Philip's act as a "value action"?
5. How does the novel conclude? What have you learned about human nature from the work? How might you use the lessons of the novel in your life beyond college?