

*Home to Harmony*  
By Philip Gulley

**About the Author** Philip Gulley lives with his family in Danville, Indiana, where he spent his childhood. HE received his undergraduate degree from Marian College in Indianapolis, and a Master of Divinity from Christian Theological Seminary in 1992. His fields of study were theology and sociology. While a pastor at the Irvington Friends Meeting in Indianapolis he began to write essays for the church newspaper. Paul Harvey Jr. received these newsletters, contacted his publisher, and the rest, as they say, is history. Gulley has written 17 books including memoirs, novels, and the Christian faith. Gulley and his wife Joan have two sons, Spencer and Sam.

**About the Book** *Home to Harmony* novel about life in a small-town community. The book is filled with characters:

- Sam Gardner, depressed thirty-eight year old father with two children who has left a pastorate and returned to his hometown to live with his parents while he tries to figure out what to do next. He is recruited to serve as pastor of the local Friends Meeting and the stories begin!
- Dale Hinshaw, a failed preacher and opinionated elder of the Harmony Friends Meeting who is on a relentless, and unorthodox, search for his “ministry.” Reclaimed buses and chickens figure in his search.
- Frank, Sam’s nearsighted male widowed secretary still mourning the death of his wife. Frank does not coddle the congregants, but finds renewed meaning in an unexpected place;
- Bob Miles, Jr., the disgruntled editor of the *Harmony Herald* who would much rather be a foreign correspondent in exotic places and makes no secret of it;
- Dr. Neely, Sam’s childhood doctor, still practicing at 80, who believes mostly in shots: “If you’re not willing to get poked with a needle then you’re probably not sick enough to see a doctor.”
- Fern Hampton, blunt-speaking former teacher and president of the Friendly Women’s Circle of the Harmony Friends Meeting, and a regular critic of Sam’s weekly sermons.
- And many, many more unique, eccentric, lovable and not, characters who may remind us of folks we know or even of ourselves.

This story is a loving and humorous story of the life of a pastor in a small community not unlike ours. The setting is the optimistically, if inaccurately, named town of Harmony, located on route 35 in rural Indiana about 2 hours from a city. Everyone in town goes to the same schools, shops at the same Rexall drug store, visits the same doctor, and, when absolutely necessary, sees the only lawyer who practices there. However the reader should be warned that this book avoids the easy labels of “quaint” or “romantic.” The people of Harmony are very real people who struggle with the big as well as the small questions of life.

Philip Gulley is a story teller *par excellence*. Each chapter of his novel can be read as a story by itself; there is no one central overarching conflict leading to a climax and final denouement, but many stories of many lives. A chapter typically begins with a childhood reminiscence of narrator Sam Gardner that establishes a context for the story to come. The main character of the chapter will be one or more of the townspeople; their intertwining stories build to give a robust picture of the diversity and complexity, difficulty and beauty of lives lived in inescapable togetherness.

Narrator Gardner wraps up the chapters with a pithy statement or homespun philosophical/theological comment. Whether the reader agrees or disagrees, we see a consistent view of life that values grace, acceptance, and forgiveness over condemnation and judgment. One suspects that these views not far removed from the author's own.

The book is a fun and quick read that raises important issues about the richness and complexity of living in community. *Home to Harmony* is the first in a series of books about the town and its inhabitants. See "Additional Reading" Below

### Questions to Start the Discussion:

1. In the first chapter the narrator says "In this anomie\* world, Harmony is a strong comfort to me. I sit on the Rexall bench and my roots grow down and hold me fast. Some folks find their joy in wandering, but I found mine in coming home." (p.9) But later he comments "There's a danger in thinking joy is a matter of location. If we can't find joy where we are, we probably won't find it anywhere." (p. 27)

Some people never leave their hometowns, content to stay where they began; others can't leave their hometowns fast enough or go far enough away. Does Gulley present a convincing argument for those who stay or return? How are those who leave portrayed? How do small people in small communities accommodate both types?

\*Social instability caused by erosion of standards and values.

Alienation and purposelessness experienced by a person or a class as a result of a lack of standards, values, or ideals: Social instability caused by erosion of standards and values.

2. Our lives are told through stories, and when these are denied to us, we spin tales to fill up the vacuum. In other words, we gossip. Dale Hinshaw is the character most likely to perpetuate preposterous accounts to fill in silences, though he finds a ready audience. He attributes the Toricelli's mysterious appearance in town to their participation in the witness protection program. Newspaperman Bob Miles "Bobservation Post" records and village comings and goings as seen through his office window and speculates, publically, on destinations and purposes. (Bob's case) What functions does gossip play in social life of the characters of the book? How do they react when the truth is revealed?

3. Religion plays a large role in the story. The congregants of the Harmony Friends Fellowship represent a wide range of views: Dale Hinshaw represents a more conservative view while Sam a somewhat more liberal. Others fall somewhere between. How does Sam hold them all together (or does he?)

### **More Small Town Stories by Phillip Gulley**

Harmony Series: *Just Shy of Harmony, Signs and Wonders, Christmas in Harmony, Life Goes On, A Change of Heart, Christmas Scrapbook, and Almost Friends.*

Porch Talk Series (Humorous Essays): *Porch Talk, Front Porch Tales, Hometown Tales, and For Everything a Season*

Memoir: *I Love You Miss Huddleston; And Other Inappropriate Longings of My Indiana*

### Tips for Scheduling and Conducting Book Discussion Groups

1. Size of group: Six to 15 is generally a good size for a group; however, larger and smaller groups can also work well.
2. Choosing a time: Of course, you want to schedule the meeting for a time that meets the needs of most of the members. Although evenings may work well for many, don't overlook luncheon meetings for folks who work, morning meetings (perhaps with babysitting) for at-home moms, and daytime meetings for retirees etc. Sunday afternoon meetings for church groups might work well, also.
3. Choosing a place Meetings can be held anyplace that is convenient for most participants! Make sure there is comfortable seating for all.
4. As the leader, your responsibility is to make sure the meeting starts on time, to keep the discussion on track, to encourage wide participation and to make sure no one person dominates the discussion. Opposing viewpoints should be encouraged, but disrespectful domination squashed!
5. As leader you should be 'super-prepared." Read the book carefully. Note page numbers of things that make an impact to you so you can quickly access these if the discussion warrants. Finally, develop some possible questions for discussion to use as needed.
6. Begin the meeting with a strategy that encourages participation. Introductions and a one-sentence reaction to the book from each participant is one suggestion.
7. Keep the conversation moving. If the discussion seems stuck on one topic, gently steer in a new direction by offering a question or quotation that moves to a new topic.
8. Don't be rigid" the goal is not to get through all the possible aspects of the novel but to bring people together to discuss those parts that interest and impact them the most.
9. Enjoy the intellectual stimulation, good fellowship, and amazing new insights generated by the group.

## **One County One Book**

## **Discussion Guide**

Finally, please complete a Leader Evaluation form and return to the Brown County Literacy Coalition to support grants for more projects like this one!