



## Reading Guide

### Fylgia

by Birgitta Hjalmarson

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Hidden in the forest of Sweden, a country church gleams in the sun. The First World War rages on the continent. Anna, in the front pew, refuses to accept the age-old beliefs the village hands her. Sixty years later, she gives refuge to a young niece, whose marriage is falling apart. Fredrik, Anna's lover, is long since dead. She still blames him for the death of their child, yet she misses his scent that would linger on her skin, like the moon that shone on the snow and colored it blue. Every day she visits the child's grave, an old woman in a beret and tweed jacket. Time after time her thoughts return to the past, when she had to go on living, even though all seemed lost.

#### From the author

It must have been my great aunt Anna, the "real" Anna, but I'm reluctant to use that word. The Anna in *Fylgia* is more real to me now, even though she's entirely fictional. When I first heard about Anna's child, my great aunts and uncles were long since dead. I had moved to California, but at the time I was visiting my mother in a small town on the coast of Sweden. My mother mentioned the child almost as if in passing. She said an injustice had been done, that Anna had been made to suffer. When I questioned her on the details, she hesitated. What she told me had the sound of a twice-told tale, more familiar than believable. A wealthy farmer forbids his daughter to marry the man she loves. Surreptitious meetings lead to the birth of an illegitimate child, all swathed in shame imposed by an unforgiving church. But the Anna I remembered could not be curbed into obedience, not by her father, and not by God. The woman, whose soothing voice I followed from room to room, was never swayed by fear. And so it all began . . .

#### Discussion Questions

1. A fylgia, Gustafa explains, is a "shape" that will follow Anna around, a guardian spirit of sorts. It may appear as an animal or even as a person, only to disappear shortly before her death. When does Anna see it?
2. Dancing occurs often in *Fylgia*. What does it signify?
3. When talking to Ella, Anna says, "I was taught early that what was good for the family and the village was also good for me. Feelings would only confuse." In what way did this lesson help or harm her?
4. Anna sees a dead wood grouse and suspects it died from fox poison. "The hen lay on her back, with a dead viper wrapped around her wings. Three wood rats had bitten into her breast. Even in death they had refused to let go." In what sense might this be a metaphor for the novel as a whole?



5. Anna tries to explain to Fredrik why the children bully Ella. "It's as if by punishing her, they think the rest of them can be saved." Is this kind of fear at the heart of bullying even today? If not, how do you explain it?
6. The threat of disease, even madness, is one of the undercurrents of *Fylgia*. How would Ulrika have been diagnosed today? Could she have been cured?
7. Anna reads Nietzsche, who says that God is dead. She disobeys Wikander, who says the word of God is set in stone. Yet, when she listens to Palestrina, she's deeply moved. "Anyone needing proof of God should only hear such music." Is she a believer after all? What is her worldview at the end?
8. After Gustafa breaks Ulrika's vase, Torpen takes it to be mended. It's "expertly repaired, with not the faintest trace of breakage." Anna recalls: "Even so, we never dared fill it with flowers, only a single peony on some special occasion, for it could never be as strong as it once had been." How does this apply to other aspects of her life as well?
9. In Chapter Thirty-Eight, when Anna goes back to the cabin, Fredrik has already left. She will always wonder what might have happened had he still been there. What do you think?
10. Anna wants to show the villagers how to use condoms, even though they are illegal. Emma objects: "I don't believe in forcing information on people who don't want it." Do you think Emma is right?

### About the author

Birgitta Hjalmanson and her husband live north of San Francisco, in a house on a hill, overlooking the ocean. When not writing, she walks along the bluff and up into the forest, alone or with friends. Tutoring an eight-year-old boy keeps her grounded. She studied Swedish, English and German Literature, earning Master's Degrees from the University of Lund, Sweden, and the University of California at Davis. While covering the San Francisco art beat as a contributing editor for *Art & Auction* in New York, she also wrote *Artful Players*, a book on early California art, published by Balcony Press. Turning to fiction, she drew on memories of her native Sweden, where she spent her childhood summers in a village much like the one we encounter in *Fylgia*. Sarah Orne Jewett's words to Willa Cather still hold true: "Of course, one day you will write about your own country. In the meantime, get all you can. One must know the world so well before one can know the parish."