The Four Winds

By Kristin Hannah

1. “Hope is a coin I carry. . . . There were times in my journey when it felt as if that penny and the hope it represented were the only things that kept me going.” (1) What is the significance of the fact that it is an American penny? Do you or your family have any keepsakes that represent your family’s hope for the future?
2. Life was very different for unmarried young women in earlier generations. Expectations for their future were sharply defined. How is Elsa shaped by these expectations and her failure to meet them?
3. Literature is the opening of a door. Through that door, Elsa saw whole other lives, other futures. What books influenced you when you were growing up?
4. In 1920s America, there was significant prejudice against Italians; we see that prejudice in Elsa’s own family. What does Rafe represent to Elsa on the night they meet?
5. “Tony and Rose were the kind of people who expected life to be hard and had become tougher to survive. . . . They might have come off the boat as Anthony and Rosalba, but hard work and the land had turned them into Tony and Rose. Americans. They would die of thirst and hunger before they’d give that up.” (76) Do you think this attitude is a common thread in those who across generations have come to chase the “American Dream”? How does one “become American”?
6. Why does the Martinelli family stay under such brutal conditions—the heat, the dust storms, the lack of food, and the dying livestock? Does it reveal anything about the grit that literally fills their bodies? Were you surprised that Elsa set off without her in-laws?
7. How do Elsa and her family remain unbroken even while enduring crippling poverty, food and shelter insecurity, and living in a town that is hostile to them? Would they have fared better in Texas?
8. What do Jack and the Communist union organizers offer the migrant workers, and Loreda in particular? Why is it a risk to associate with them and what is Elsa’s hesitation?
9. Do you have any family stories from the Depression?
10. Did you find the end of Elsa’s and her family’s journey satisfying? Where do you think Ant and Loreda ended up? How do you see Loreda’s life being like her mother’s? How will it be different?