

Running Out: In Search of Water on the High Plains by Lucas Bessire
Princeton University Press, 2021

Finalist for the National Book Award
An intimate reckoning with aquifer depletion in America's heartland

Sample Discussion Questions

1. "Running out" is a common phrase in the Plains that refers to anything that is dwindling, including "those who leave behind family of home without honoring their rightful obligations to others." What are the various ways the author describes "running out" in the book? How might they be connected or not?
2. The author's grandmother, Lila Fern, compiled extensive notes about the history of the land featured in the book. How do her life and work inform the author's writing? Do you or your family have photos, letters or notes that depict the places you grew up?
3. The author notes that his prior fieldwork led to critiques of deforestation, even as aquifer depletion meant confronting his own complicity in similar patterns of destruction. Much of *Running Out* is about reflection and how to take responsibility. Did reading *Running Out* make you reflect on anything in your past or your family history that you feel merits further reflection today?
4. The author discovers that, in some places, farmers are permitted to pump more than the amount of groundwater that remains and that aquifer depletion seems to be encouraged by the structure of farm finance. How do you feel about this? Do you think the government should play more of a role in discouraging groundwater depletion?
5. The book locates aquifer depletion in relation to the attitudes that caused prior environmental changes on the Great Plains. How does irrigation farming compare and contrast with the dynamics that led to the extirpation of bison and the Dust Bowl?
6. What, if anything, did you learn about farming in *Running Out*? What aspects of agriculture would you like to learn more about?
7. The author suggests that our ways of relating to natural resources like aquifers are also part of how we relate to one another, and offers several examples. What is the significance of parents and children working together to pass down lessons and find solutions for groundwater depletion?
8. *Running Out* describes a wide range of perspectives on depletion, within and beyond Plains communities. What perspectives are voiced by different characters in the book? How do their experiences compare and contrast with those of the author?
9. The book shows how aquifer loss is a complex problem with many different aspects. What do you think are the best solutions to this problem? What can we do to save the aquifers for future generations?