This reading group guide for Cycling Home from Siberia includes an introduction, discussion questions, ideas for enhancing your book club, and a Q&A with author Rob Lilwall. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

INTRODUCTION

Cycling Home from Siberia is Rob Lilwall’s extraordinary account of his epic, three-year, thirty-thousand mile bicycle trek across the globe. Beginning in the frozen wastelands of Siberia, Rob explores the back roads of China, the inhospitable jungles of Papua New Guinea, the deserts of Australia, the icebound passes of Tibet, and the lonely valleys of Afghanistan. Along the way he encounters adventure, violence, isolation, disease, and extreme climates. The most remarkable of all, however, is the warm hospitality he receives from people of all cultures, regions, and walks of life.

TOPICS & QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What was Rob's life like before he set out on his journey? What were your first impressions of him? Rob was twenty-seven when he made this life-changing decision to take his trip. When have you had to make a similarly important decision? How old were you and what were the deciding factors in your choice?

2. In the email where Al proposes this trip to Rob, he writes: "I am sure you know there is never a time more likely for you to do it and if you don't do it soon you know that you probably never will ..." (p. 22). Do you think Al's reasoning is the primary impetus for Rob's decision, or are there other factors as well? How does Rob plan his route and choose the countries he will visit?

3. In preparation for his journey Rob explains, "Most of my clothes and equipment had been bought at slashed prices on eBay. In reality I was not at all sure if they would be up to the Job" (page 4), and he admits that "I am not unfit, but in the flurry of getting everything ready before the ride, I reasoned that I would get fit properly once we started riding." (page 31). Do you think Rob takes the preparation for this trip too lightly? How would you have prepared differently?

4. On their ride through Siberia, Al grows impatient with Rob's slower pace and ability. Toward the end of Rob's journey, the tables are turned when he finds himself
similarly frustrated with the abilities of his riding partners. What do you think Rob learns from both experiences?

5. Throughout the story Rob experiences poverty, violence, and hardship first-hand. However, due to the limits of his budget and schedule he feels as though there is little he can do to help. A particularly striking example is when Rob and Al survive a deadly fire at Vladimir and Lena's Russian café (page 83). Upon setting off again on their journey Rob writes, "Our quest for adventure and our race against the visas was suddenly void of meaning . . . people were suffering and we were doing nothing to help them" (page 86). How does this experience seem to affect him? Discuss other examples from the book that resonated with you. How is Rob able to get back on his bike and continue his journey after these experiences? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt helpless?

6. Once Rob and Al part ways in Japan, Rob continues his ride alone. In what ways is he affected by isolation and loneliness, and what resources does he call on to deal with these experiences?

7. During his ride Rob relies on the kindness of strangers for the very basics of existence—shelter, food, water. What does this say about Rob's trust in humanity? How does this trust change throughout his journey?

8. While riding through Hong Kong Rob meets Christine (page 147) and they develop a long-distance relationship. Compare this to Al's decision to break up with his girlfriend before setting out on his cycling journey (page 30). How does having a girlfriend both help and hinder Rob? Have you ever been in a long-distance relationship? What were the challenges? The benefits?

9. After Al's wheel breaks in Russia (page 39), Rob hopes he "would grow up as a person and as a Christian" (page 42). Later in the story he contemplates the differences between Islam and Christianity with Anwar in Pakistan (page 311) and explains his issues with "the different paths up the same mountain' approach" (page 313). Compare these two passages, as a guide, and discuss the ways Rob learns to be more openminded toward other faiths, while developing a stronger sense of his own.

10. Consider the physicality of Rob's ride and the sheer endurance of the process. What does Rob learn about his own physical and psychological limits? Has there ever been a time where you were pushed to your limits?

11. Rob faces many challenges in the countries he visits. He is robbed in Siberia (page
77), he must learn how to negotiate reckless traffic in China (page 127), he is plagued by nearly impassable terrain in Papua New Guinea (page 200), he lacks a travel permit for Tibet and must secretly slip through checkpoints (page 261), and in Afghanistan he is mistaken for a suicide bomber (page 329). Why do you think Rob chooses to visit places where he isn't necessarily welcomed? Contrast this with the extraordinary hospitality Rob encounters almost everywhere he goes. Do his experiences, as a whole, seem to make him wearier or more tolerant of others?

12. After his three-year journey, how does Rob decide that it is time to come home? How is he changed by this epic adventure?

13. At his homecoming Rob describes feelings of emptiness. Rather than feeling a sense of triumph, accomplishment, or even relief, he writes: "now that I was 'home,' I tried to remember the reason why I was trying to get here" (page 389). How does the meaning of "home" change for Rob throughout his journey? Do you think he will be able to find "home" again?

ENHANCE YOUR BOOK CLUB

1. Rob is offered yak butter tea during his time in Tibet—a symbol of hospitality offered from even the poorest of people. Make butter tea (it can be made with conventional butter) to serve at your meeting. You can learn more about this ancient beverage and find a recipe at www.tibetanlife.com/tibetan-butter-tea.html.

2. Ask members of your group about their experiences with isolation or a significant physical challenge. How do their experiences relate to those portrayed in the book?

3. Check out the author's website at www.roblilwall.com, where you can read his blog, see pictures from his trip around the world, and learn about Viva—the charity for which he raised money on his trip and which he continues to do fundraising work. Email Rob to tell him about your book club discussion or ask him a question—you may get an interesting reply from the author!

A CONVERSATION WITH ROB LILWALL

You have a very active website. Do you receive feedback from your fans online? How does that compare to meeting them in person at book or other events?

I regularly receive emails from people who have read the book and/or seen the TV series, and from people who are considering going on an epic journey of their own.
One of the main pieces of advice I always give is: "Beware of the pessimists—there will be plenty of people out there who will tell you that what you are planning is impossible. Instead, try to meet the people who tell you it is possible and talk to them instead." I also really enjoy meeting people in person at events.

Before you set off with Al in Siberia, the outlook—both from your perspective and that of the Russians you met—looks pretty grim. You write, "There was no shortage of pessimism about our prospects for survival" (page 10). Looking back, would you change anything about the way you prepared for and approached your journey?

I think we could have been better prepared, but I think the overall approach of "let's make this up as we go along and use our heads to figure things out" is a fun and good way to do an adventure like this. Obviously, for more specialist forms of adventure (climbing Everest, rowing the Pacific, etc), it is important to have more sophisticated equipment and proper planning.

Your book includes references and quotes from Tolkien's The Lord of the Rings trilogy. Do those stories hold a particular significance for you?

I think reading good stories is a great way to make sense of our lives, and The Lord of the Rings resonates a lot with me and many other people. It is about an epic, seemingly impossible journey, in which the key characters have to face impossible challenges and fears along the way, but as they continue moving onward, they grow up in ways they could not have imagined. I also really enjoy the sense of companionship you get between Frodo and Sam in The Lord of the Rings, though things didn't work out quite that way with Al and me!

You openly discuss your faith in the book, and you have many conversations with people from other religions. In what ways did this trip test and eventually strengthen your own beliefs?

The journey tested and strengthened my beliefs in several different ways. Firstly, as I was on my own so much, and often in lonely or frightening situations, this meant that I prayed a lot—and my belief in a God who cares for me meant that I never felt completely alone. Secondly, it was an important experience for me to encounter many different church communities in the many different countries I went through—from
the Orthodox in Russia, to Catholics in Papua New Guinea, to Pentecostals in South Korea. Meeting all of these wonderful Christians helped me to understand the global church as a global Christian family, despite our differences of opinion on some practical and theological matters. Finally, I think my faith was challenged by encounters with the many good and hospitable people of other religions, in particular the Buddhists of Tibet and the Muslims of Pakistan and Iran. They looked after me very well, and we had lots of interesting conversations in which I learnt a lot about their beliefs. Although I did not become persuaded to change religion, and I did not start thinking that "all religions are basically the same deep down," I did start to see beyond some of the caricatures we are sometimes given of other faiths, and I increasingly came to respect the goodness and sincerity of the people following them in a much deeper way than before.

**Through the book you describe the development of your relationship with Christine. Were there particular challenges or rewards from being in a long-distance relationship? Can you tell us what happened with your relationship with Christine?**

A long distance relationship is certainly not easy—we missed each other a lot, and it must have been especially hard for Christine because I was often out of touch, and sometimes she didn't even know where I was. That said, for me, in life, it was always very rare for me to meet someone special, and soon after I met Christine I realized that she was an amazing person with an amazing character—and she liked me! So we decided it was worth keeping it going long distance, however hard that would be. We were also helped by the fact that sometimes Christine could come and meet me during her holidays. As to what happened to us after I got back . . . you have to read the book to find that out.

**Are you still close with Al? After your arduous ordeal in Siberia, would you consider going on another biking trip with him?**

Yes, Al and I are still good friends. Just after I got home I was best man at his wedding. Although we haven't yet been on another biking trip together, in early 2010 we did go on a short hiking expedition—this time we did not have very much time, so we decided to have an adventure in England—we ended up setting off to walk a lap of the M25 motorway (the highway that circles London). We wanted to test two theories during the walk:

a) Is it possible to go on a great adventure near to home (without flying to Siberia)?
b) Are people in England friendly and hospitable, or is it just people in other parts of the world?

As it turned out, the day we set off was also the day that a huge blizzard hit England, and much of the country was brought to a standstill by the heavy snowstorms. But we loved it—it was so beautiful to walk through the snowy towns, forests, and fields that surround London, camping in the wild as we went (though we did not take a tent, just a sheet of waterproof material to make shelters with). So I am pleased to report that both our hypotheses were proved true: it was a genuine adventure, and people did invite us to stay and looked after us on the way. I hope I will go on more adventures with Al in the future.

**Throughout the book you provide a keen understanding of political and social problems in the countries and regions where you traveled. What kind of research did you do in preparation for your trip? Was it difficult to keep riding after personally witnessing the turmoil in some of these countries?**

I did not do a lot of research before the trip, though I did usually try to read one or two books about each country while I was there (I had lots of time for reading when I camped). I also talked to the people I met about the things I had been reading about. It was distressing to see the difficult issues that people face in many of the countries I went through. Seeing this has been a big influence to motivate me to raise money for Viva and their work with children at-risk across the world.

**Are you considering taking another major journey by yourself?**

I hope to keep going on adventures throughout my life, though it is unlikely that I will do something as long as cycling home from Siberia again. My first major expedition after cycling home from Siberia was a solo expedition on foot across Israel and the West Bank at the start of 2010. I started in the Golan Heights in the north, and after 300 miles of walking, wild camping, and meeting extraordinary people, finished at the ruined fortress of Masada beside the Dead Sea in the south. It was an amazing part of the world to see on foot (I suppose this is the way that people of ancient times would have seen it)—it had such varied geography (from grassy meadows to harsh deserts), and its history, religion, and politics are obviously also remarkable. I do have a few other ideas for future expeditions in the pipeline and I am currently in the process of planning an adventure with my wife. I also think it is possible to treat the whole of life as an adventure, even if you just stay in one place, and I am sure that the people who say that "getting married and having kids is the greatest adventure of all" are right.
You saw and experienced some amazing things on your journey. Does anything stand out to you in particular? What was your favorite country to ride through?

For fun, I think China was my favorite. China has beautiful landscapes, ancient history, epic cities, fun people, and decent roads. It was also really cheap to live and travel there, and I especially enjoyed getting away from the main roads and into the mountain villages. However, although China was the most fun, some of my favorite memories are of the very difficult places—like Siberia, Papua New Guinea, Tibet, and Afghanistan. When I think back on those places, I am just in awe of their raw, wild beauty, and the people who live there for their whole lives. They are much, much tougher than I am!

What do you feel is the most significant take-away from this experience?

It's hard to choose one thing. It helped me to appreciate the wonder of being alive, and to learn that there are many amazing people out there in the world and that everyone's got a story to tell.

What have you been doing since you finished your trip? Are you still teaching?
Do you have a new book, project, or adventure in the works?

After the trip, as well as writing the book, making the National Geographic TV series and doing some lecturing about the journey, I also went back to university to study theology for a while. I have also been on, and continue to plan, other shorter expeditions. But the biggest adventure has been marrying Christine, and we have now started working together for the charity I supported on my bike trip—Viva. Viva is all about helping existing local church and community projects in the poorest parts of the world to work together and more effectively to help children at-risk (such as street children and slum children). We really believe that the work they are doing is making, and can make, a huge difference to vulnerable children around the world. We have now moved to Hong Kong in order to set up and run a mobilization and fundraising office for them. This is a very different sort of adventure to the cycling—but it is still a great adventure and challenge—and we are both daunted and excited about what lies ahead. We are trying to treat the whole of life as an adventure—which is what it is, I think.