



## DISCUSSION GUIDE

### *American Anthem*- (Formerly *Prelude, Cadence, and Jubilee*)

by B.J. Hoff

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#### FOR PART ONE- (FORMERLY PUBLISHED AS *PRELUDE*)

1. This isn't just the beginning of the story, but also an account of "beginnings" for most of its main characters. Do you think starting over is more difficult for women than for men, and, if so, in what ways? In what significant ways does Susanna's new venture differ from the "new beginnings" of Bethany Cole and Vangie MacGovern?
2. How do you feel about Michael's attempts to keep the truth about his marriage from Susanna? Do you believe he's being fair, protective, or deceitful? Do you think Paul is justified in finally telling Susanna the truth? How can loyalty to a friend or family member sometimes intrude upon the well-being or even the safety of a third party?
3. When did you first sense that Susanna's doubts and misgivings about Michael, based on Deirdre's letters, might be unfounded? Have you ever formed an opinion about someone based solely on information supplied by another, only to learn that the person was far different from what you'd been told? How did you move past the temptation to let your judgment be clouded in the same way again?
4. Do you agree with Vangie that the comforting figure she witnesses in the harbor just before they leave Ireland is a godly "promise?" Have there been times in your life when God has somehow manifested to you a sign or a promise of His presence and His safekeeping? How did you respond?
5. In your opinion, is the young street musician, Renny Magee, a tragic figure or a survivor to be admired? What are her strengths? What are her weaknesses? Why do you think Vangie is so drawn to the girl, and Renny to Vangie?
6. One of the epigraphs in part one, written by John Boyle O'Reilly, reads:  
*"Our feet on the torrent's brink,  
Our eyes on the cloud afar,  
We fear the things we think,  
Instead of the things that are."*

Which character do you think this most applies to: Vangie, Susanna, or Renny Magee?  
Why?

7. When Andrew tells Bethany that he believes the kind of healing being effected by D. L. Moody and Ira Sankey in their evangelistic campaigns is more important than what he can offer as a physician, what is he getting at? Do you think he's being wise or foolish to subject himself to elements--such as prolonged cold and dampness aboard ship--that he knows could aggravate his poor health? Do you agree with his reasoning about this issue?

8. As one of the early women physicians in the United States, Bethany faces a number of obstacles in gaining the respect of her peers and her patients. What do you believe accounts for Andrew's immediate acceptance of her as a member of his own profession--and a partner in his medical practice? What makes him different from most of his colleagues? Have you ever felt the resistance of your contemporaries in relation to your occupation or your field of study? How do you deal with the problems you encounter without becoming bitter or resentful?

9. What other significant elements besides music did you find woven into this first section of the book?

10. Toward the end of the book, Susanna realizes that she stands at a "crossroads," that she has a choice between holding onto the past or moving forward in faith. Have you faced a similar crossroads in your life? How did your decision affect your walk of faith, your spiritual journey?

**FOR PART TWO- (FORMERLY PUBLISHED AS *CADENCE*)**

1. One of the few times Susanna manages to let go of her feelings of inadequacy is when she's at the piano, absorbed in the music of a "great composer" — or in Michael's original compositions. Not only is she swept up, beyond her insecurities, when she plays, but she also seems to gain a strong sense of the composer's heart. When God gifts a person with an exceptional ability or talent, do you feel that others can actually be drawn, moved closer, to God by exposure to that gift? How do we define "talent" as opposed to "gift?" What do you think accounts for the way some seem possessed of many gifts and abilities while others seem to excel at very little, if anything?

2. Just when his future couldn't look more bleak, Conn MacGovern rushes to rescue a terrified stallion on the docks of New York City. For the first time since their arrival in America, hope for a better life for him and his family seems within reach. This one impulsive act--coming to the aid of a suffering animal and those placed in charge of the animal--leads to events that only hours before couldn't have been imagined. While some might tend to see this occurrence as coincidence, what do you think? Is there such a thing as coincidence in the life of a Christian?

3. After meeting Maylee, a child afflicted with a premature aging disease, Dr. Bethany Cole confronts her associate, Andrew Carmichael, with a question similar to one asked throughout the ages by non-believers and believers: "He (God) may not have caused it (the disease), but he could prevent it! If God loves her so much, then why doesn't he simply take it from her? Or at least provide a means of mitigating the symptoms and

easing her misery?" Have you ever struggled with the question of why God doesn't intervene to spare the suffering--or the life--of one of his children? Do you believe it's wrong to question why God does or doesn't act in certain ways? How do you think God views our doubting and questioning of his will?

**4.** Although Michael loves his young cousin, Paul, "like a brother"--and though he despises himself for the jealousy that has begun to plague him in regard to Paul and Susanna--he can't deny the fact that he is jealous. He recognizes the destructiveness of this emotion and is determined not to let it gain control of his feelings again, as it had during his marriage to Susanna's sister. Is there ever a time when jealousy is "acceptable?" What does the Bible mean when it calls God a "jealous God?"

**5.** What do you think accounts for Michael's reluctance to move beyond friendship with Susanna, when he knows he loves her? Is he merely being protective of her, or is it something else?

**6.** What was your first reaction to the following: Upon "meeting" the opium-addicted mother of young Robert Warburton and his small sisters, all illegitimate? Upon hearing the boy's angry accusations, that their father was a highly respected, prestigious clergyman? Upon hearing Andrew Carmichael's charge that people--including "good people," Christian people--are inclined to forget the "Mary Lamberts of the world," that their problems often seem "so overwhelming that one person couldn't possibly make a difference?" Can you think of any situations, either from personal experience, or perhaps in your own community or church, that would contradict this assumption?

**7.** Susanna was quick to believe that Michael had been deceitful, had deliberately attempted to dupe her into playing the organ for his Christmas concert even though he knew she didn't want to. Why was she so quick to suspect him of duplicity? Have you ever reacted in a similar manner--made assumptions, suspected someone of trying to deceive you based on past experience or because of something you thought you knew? How did you feel ... and how did you react ... when you realized you'd been wrong?

**8.** What does Susanna finally realize about her lifelong avoidance of the "limelight," her preference to remain "backstage?" When she finally admits that her humility might have been a kind of false humility, she asks herself the question: "How did one distinguish genuine humility--a virtue God not only approved but even commanded--from a desire to be 'safe,' a deliberate attempt to stay backstage out of fear of failure?" How would you answer that question?"

**9.** What does Vangie mean when she finally admits to Conn that her reason for keeping her pregnancy a secret was because she meant to "punish" him? Have you ever done this--withheld something you knew would bring joy to a person you cared about as a means of "punishing" or "getting back" at that person? What do you think the real motivation for this kind of behavior is?

**10.** In Susanna's eyes, Michael had "exchanged a crown (the crown of celebrity) for a

Cross, the Cross of Christ." What are some of the pitfalls of celebrity? What is the Christian's perception of "success" and "celebrity" to be?

**FOR PART THREE- (FORMERLY PUBLISHED AS *JUBILEE*)**

1. When Andrew Carmichael first goes to the home of Robert Warburton, he's aware that he's exceeding the boundaries of his profession. He senses that anger—an anger stemming from the determination to right a wrong inflicted on a patient—motivates his behavior. Do you agree? Is this a case of “righteous anger” or are Andrew's actions prompted more by a kind of carnal outrage?
2. When Susanna realizes that Michael has become her closest friend as well as her husband-to-be, she's somewhat surprised by the thought. Yet, friendship can be the very cornerstone of a marriage. What other elements can work together to strengthen and enrich a husband and wife's life together?
3. Is Riccardo Emmanuel, Michael's father, genuinely concerned that his son might be wasting a God-given gift (Michael's singing voice), or does his frustration have more to do with his own pride? Is his refusal to accept his son's retirement from the opera world truly motivated by a conviction that Michael has made a terrible mistake? Or is he merely unwilling to see Michael give up his former celebrity and success?
4. In your opinion, is there any basis for Renny Magee's feelings of guilt about the death of Aidan MacGovern? Do you believe, as Renny seems to believe, that if she had stayed behind in Ireland, she could have spared the MacGovern family the pain of losing their first-born son?
5. What do you think accounts for Frank Donovan's obvious resolve to protect, first, Andrew Carmichael, and, later, Mary Lambert, at all costs? Is this tendency to “guard,” to “shelter” those he cares about a contradiction to his real nature? Describe, as you see it, the true character of the Irish police sergeant.
6. How does Susanna handle the challenge of not allowing her own frustration with Michael's father to overshadow her efforts to understand him, and at the same time attempt to keep peace between the two men?
7. What do you think Maylee means when she tells Michael that, when he prays, she can almost imagine that she “sees Jesus?”
8. How does God use Natalie Guthrie, one of Andrew's patients, to bring healing into the beleaguered physician's life?
9. After hearing Mary Lambert's incredible story about Robert Warburton, Bethany Cole seems almost dazed by the horror of the situation. At the same time, when she returns to face Frank Donovan and Andrew Carmichael, she's obviously overwhelmed by something more than the awareness of Mary's torment. What emotion is responsible for her shocked condition?

10. We've seen evidence in our own lives that although God sometimes takes away, He also gives. In what ways do you also see the truth of this at work in the lives of some of *American Anthem's* characters, particularly with Conn and Vangie MacGovern, Michael and Susanna, and Renny Magee?

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