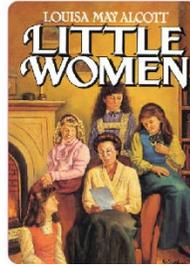


# Connecting Generations



## Why Am I Reading This?

These selections highlight both the differences and similarities between generations and suggest ways of increasing understanding and empathy by offering opportunities to explore timeless issues relating to different stages of the human life cycle, reminding adults of what it was like to be young, and offering younger readers a window into the land of adulthood.

## Book List

*Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White

*Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age* by Susan Swetnam

*I Am the Cheese* by Robert Cormier

*Jackalope Dreams* by Mary Clearman Blew

*Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott

*Lord of the Flies* by William Golding

*Passages West: 19 Stories of Youth & Identity*, edited by Hugh Nichols

*Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* by Mildred Taylor

*Tatterhood and Other Tales* by Ethel Johnston Phelps

*The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie

*The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver

*The Bridge to Terabithia* by Katherine Paterson

*The Enders Hotel* by Brandon R. Schrand

*The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway

*The Secret Life of Bees* by Sue Monk Kidd

*The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame

*The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor

*The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum

*When We Were Romans* by Matthew Kneale

# Book Summaries and Discussion Questions

## The Bridge to Terabithia

This is a poignant exploration of friendship and death. The novel introduces readers to two sensitive young people, Jess and Leslie, who form a close friendship. Their wish to escape humdrum reality inspires them to create their own fantasy kingdom modeled on C. S. Lewis' land of Narnia discovered when reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Their secret place is reached by a rope swing over a creek. The swing becomes their bridge to a magical world where the realities of life don't intrude.

The concept of the "bridge between worlds" becomes the author's metaphor for her storytelling. "I have spent a good part of my life trying to construct bridges," she said in accepting a Newbery Medal for the book. There were so many chasms I saw that needed bridging—chasms of time and culture and disparate human nature." (Source: Theme pamphlet by Elizabeth R. Baer, for American Library Association, 1984).

### Author Information

Born in 1932 in China to missionary parents, Katherine was herself a teacher and a missionary in Japan. She received her master's degrees in English Bible and Religious Education, and her husband is a Presbyterian minister. They have four children and seven grandchildren. Mrs. Paterson has written more than 30 books for children, including 14 novels for young people. Two of these novels, *The Master Puppeteer* and *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, were National Book Award winners, in 1977 and 1979 respectively. *The Great Gilly Hopkins* was also the single Honor Book for the 1979 Newbery Medal. She received the Newbery Medal in 1978 for *Bridge to Terabithia* and again in 1981 for *Jacob Have I Loved*. *Lyddie* was the U.S. contribution to the Honors List of the International Board of Books for Young People in 1994, and *Jip, His Story*, was the winner of the 1997 Scott O'Dell Award for Historical Fiction. Her books have been published in more than 25 languages, and she is the 1998 recipient of the most distinguished international award given to a writer for a contribution to children's literature, the Hans Christian Andersen Award. Her most recent books are a novel, *The Same Stuff as Stars*, and a picture book, *Blueberries for the Queen*, which she co-authored with her husband, John. Katherine Paterson lives in Vermont, the setting for the last few chapters of *Long Road Home*.

## Discussion Questions for The Bridge to Terabithia

1. How does the book fit with the theme of Connecting Generations?
2. Are there disturbing elements of childhood presented in this book? What are they?
3. As a child, did you ever experience bullying? How did you deal with it then? How would you deal with it now?
4. Why do you think the author used swear words in writing a children's book?
5. Does learning about people's personal problems help us deal with difficult people? Where in the book do we gain empathy for others?
6. Can dreaming and imagining be a good way to escape the pressures and stress of daily life or is it a waste of time?
7. Does this book have therapeutic value in dealing with the loss of a loved one?
8. Is Jess's reaction to news of Leslie's death plausible? What does he gain by her death?
9. Do most children create magical kingdoms or demonstrate in some way the need to retreat from the harsh realities of the adult world?

## **Charlotte's Web**

This story by E.B. White (1952) is far more than the saga of a pig and her barnyard friends. It "...celebrates life, the seasons, the goodness of the barn, the beauty of the world, and the glory of everything." (E. B. White). Readers will discover the traditional values of the rural 1950's, the joy of a loyal friend, the pain of growing up, the fear of death we all share, and the ineluctable cycle of rebirth. (Source: Theme pamphlet by Elizabeth R. Baer, for American Library Association, 1984).

### **Author Information**

E. B. White, the author of such beloved children's classics as *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*, was born in Mount Vernon, New York. He graduated from Cornell University in 1921 and, five or six years later, joined the staff of *The New Yorker* magazine. E.B. White authored over seventeen books of prose and poetry and was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1973. In addition to writing children's books, E. B. White also wrote books for adults, as well as writing poems and essays, and drawing sketches for *The New Yorker* magazine. Some of his other books include: *One Man's Meat*, *The Second Tree from the Corner*, *Letters of E. B. White*, *The Essays of E. B. White*, and *Poems and Sketches of E. B. White*. Funnily enough for such a famous writer, he always said that he found writing difficult and bad for one's disposition, but he kept at it! Mr. White won countless awards, including the 1971 National Medal for Literature and the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal, which commended him for making "a substantial and lasting contribution to literature for children." He died on October 1, 1985, and he is survived by his son and three grandchildren.

## Discussion Questions for Charlotte's Web

1. In order to enjoy this story, one must be able to enter into a realm of imagination and play. How successful were you in making that transition?
2. What are the highlights in terms of humor in the story?
3. Do you think there is meant to be any profound symbolism in the image of the web itself? What is it?
4. When were you first made aware of the life of farm animals? Did you ever care for animals who were in danger of ending up on the dinner table?
5. Recent research has found evidence that animals have what might be called "emotions." Is this a statement you agree or disagree with?
6. Do you think this story is helpful for children dealing with death?
7. Is Wilbur the embodiment of Everyman to some extent? He feels the need for friendship and also faces the stark reality of death, untimely death actually, and he feels very insecure as a consequence. How do you regard the characterization (personification) of Wilbur?
8. Charlotte's Web has been called "a fable for adults as well as children." What do you make of this statement?
9. If you were to recommend this story to an adult, what would you say about it?

## **Home Mountains: Reflections From a Western Middle Age**

After a youth spent in the East in quiet discontent, Susan Swetnam writes about the middle-age surprise of finding herself at home in southeastern Idaho. The book's autobiographical essays chronicle her attempts to come to terms with various "homes"—with the beautiful expanses and sometimes quirky occupants of the Intermountain West, but also with life choices, with family, with love, with responsibility, and with the need to keep adapting to life's ongoing changes. Essay topics range from the surprise of winning a blue ribbon at the Eastern Idaho State Fair, to mountain rambling, to fighting fires, to accepting the blessings of a love which can only be temporary. Youth is hardly the apex of life, Swetnam concludes; middle age, too, can be a time of deep satisfaction, a time of dawning self-realization. *Home Mountains* was honored by the Idaho Library Association in 2000.

### **Author Information**

Susan Swetnam was born in Philadelphia in 1950 and educated at the University of Delaware and the University of Michigan. She came to Idaho in 1979 to teach at Idaho State University. A professor of English and a writer, she has published essays and articles in a wide variety of national, regional, and literary magazines, including *Gourmet*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Black Canyon Quarterly*. She won a writer's residency from Washington State's Espy Foundation in 2004. In addition to *Home Mountains*, she has published book-length studies of Mormon pioneer life story writing and of Idaho writer Grace Jordan, as well as a collection of personal essays about teaching (*My Best Teachers Were Saints*, 2006). She has been active in public humanities programming in Idaho, including Let's Talk About It programs for more than twenty years, as was her late husband, poet Ford Swetnam.

## Discussion Questions for Home Mountains

1. The author begins the Introduction by recalling how little she knew or thought about being middle-aged when she was a teen. How typical is this? Why would adulthood be so hard to imagine when teens are surrounded by grown-ups? Could teens improve their chances of future happiness and success by giving more thought to being middle-aged? Is this likely to happen?
2. "The Worst Christmas" turns out not to be so bad after all, despite the sense of dread and loneliness that precede it. Childhood memories clash with recent uncertainties and disappointments, yet in the end, on the observation level of a train bound for Oregon, past, present, and future come together in a satisfying flash of acceptance and understanding. How? Why? What has happened? What has changed?
3. Eating alone, a solitary meal in an expensive restaurant -- is this a pleasure best savored in middle age? Would a teenager or a septuagenarian be able to derive as much satisfaction and enjoyment from such a meal? Why? Or why not?
4. Many of these essays contrast the traditions and values of the author's Eastern childhood with the culture and lifestyle she has found in Idaho as an adult. What is it about life here that she finds so appealing and compelling?
5. "College Choir" recounts an unexpected lesson learned that had less to do with music than with sorting out priorities and making choices. How does this relate to making a successful passage from childhood to adulthood? How does it relate to teaching?
6. In "My Father's Work," Swetnam speaks of her father's reinvention of himself, and of her own reinvention of herself in her twenties and early thirties. What does this mean? Is it possible to reinvent oneself? Is it more likely at some stages of life than at others? How does this concept of reinvention help her to reconnect with her father?
7. "Orion" begins with an attempt to climb King Lear Peak and moves on to a reflection on the aging process, the relentless pressure of time upon us all, the changes in our minds and bodies, our priorities and goals as the years unfold. What evidence do you see of such changes in your own life and in the lives of your friends and family?

## **I Am The Cheese**

*I Am The Cheese* by Robert Cormier (1977) is a starkly contemporary novel, touching on issues such as government control, the ethics of psychiatry, and organized crime—all topics that were previously deemed taboo in children’s literature. Cormier utilizes a tightly controlled, three-strand narrative to tell his chilling story. Hence, the reader must shift among young Adam Farmer’s first-person account of his experiences, a third-person description of Adam’s life, and excerpts of taped interviews between Adam and a mysterious man named Brint. The novel is at once a mystery, a spy/counterspy story, and a classic quest book in which a boy searches for his father. But unlike Cassie Logan, and unlike the archetypal hero of most quests, Adam Farmer appears to be retreating from consciousness, from a resolution to his odyssey. Cormier uses his reference to “The Farmer in the Dell” in his title in a bitter and ironic fashion. It would be unfair to reveal the conclusion of this novel; suffice it to say that Cormier has been criticized for his bleak endings (American Library Association, 1984).

## **Author Information**

Cormier was acknowledged as the finest writer in the young adult genre, and also the first to show the literary world that YA novels could be not only realistic about teen concerns but unflinchingly honest about big questions like the abuse of power, courage, forgiveness and redemption. The brilliance of his writing earned him many literary prizes. After the success of his first YA novel, *The Chocolate War*, Cormier astounded critics three years later with the brilliantly constructed *I Am the Cheese*, and in the following years continued to surprise his readers with the originality of each new book while maintaining a continuity of recognizable style and themes. Cormier lived a life of great stability and contentment, growing up in a large, warm French-Canadian and Irish-American family in the small mill town of Leominster, Massachusetts; marrying Constance Senay, the girl of his dreams; working as a newspaper man for many years and writing fiction on weekends in his noisy home with four children. He was nearly fifty when he found success as a YA writer.

## Discussion Questions for *I Am the Cheese*

1. Science fiction or reality? This novel was published in 1977. In what ways is it both a product of its time and a harbinger of things to come?
2. What is this novel about? Consider each perspective described below. Which, in your view, describes the book best?
3. The individual is ignorant of and at the mercy of a governmental bureaucracy that is big and mysterious. Citizens have become disenfranchised; democracy is an illusion.
4. Adam's plight symbolizes the state of contemporary adolescence, involving a search for identity in a hostile, uncaring world.
5. The novel is a chronicle of an adolescent's mental breakdown. Adam's narrative reveals that he is paranoid, claustrophobic. Can we trust him as a narrator?
6. How many of you read *I Am the Cheese* as adolescents?
7. If this is the first time you read *I Am the Cheese*, what is your reaction to the ending? How would reading this book for the second time change the experience?
8. What are your thoughts on the format of the book? How does the format help the story unfold?
9. What clues does the author give the reader that things are not quite as they seem?
10. How does the author portray people in authority and the role of the government?
11. Who does Adam meet along his journey? What might each person represent to an adolescent?
12. How is Amy portrayed? How is she different from Adam?
13. How is Adam's mother portrayed? How is her reaction to witness protection different from her husband's?
14. Why might this book be on "censored" lists in some communities and schools? What might be considered objectionable?
15. Has Adam suffered a mental breakdown or is his condition medically-induced?
16. How does the author use "The Farmer in the Dell" to advance the story?

## Little Women

Little Women by Louisa May Alcott (1868) is an enduring book that yields some startling insights into nineteenth century American life when one reads it as an adult. The novel has never been out of print since its initial publication in 1868, and it has been translated into no less than 27 languages. How to account for such longstanding appeal? Jo, in her feisty rebellion against the shackles of girlhood, is a character with whom all readers, especially girls, can identify. The novel raises still-valid questions about options and roles for women and also demonstrates the strides toward equality women have achieved in the past century. The novel was an instant success and became the precursor of the realistic family novel. (Source: Theme pamphlet by Elizabeth R. Baer, for American Library Association, 1984.)

### Author Information

Alcott, born into a New England family, was the second daughter of Bronson Alcott, a transcendentalist visionary and educator, and Abigail May Alcott, who bore the primary responsibility for keeping the family clothed and sheltered. Encouraged by Bronson, each member of the family regularly kept a journal and worked on self-improvement, just as the members of the fictional family do. Alcott approached the writing of a “girl’s story” at the urging of her father and her publisher, with a certain amount of resignation as she would have preferred to make her reputation with adult fiction. She had published books ranging from one on her Civil War nursing experiences to a fictionalized autobiography. However, given the urgent need of her family for financial assistance, she penned the first half of what is now published as one novel (the sequel came out in 1869) within three months’ time. According to family legend, she trained herself to write with both hands so that she could switch when one hand grew tired!

## Discussion Questions for Little Women

1. Which character do you most closely identify with and why?
2. Does this book have appeal to modern teens? What are the enduring qualities of the book?
3. If you read this book as a child, how do you relate differently to it as an adult? Share a personal experience of reading the book as a child.
4. What makes this book memorable to you? Would you recommend it to someone to read?
5. There are a number of themes running throughout the book, some of which seem to be relevant for children and other relevant for adults. What are some of the themes that seem of most interest to children? To adults?
6. How does the relative absence of the father seem to affect the girls' behavior and their feelings toward him? Does the relationship between daughters and father seem similar to other father–daughter relationships you have seen? How does his absence affect the development of Jo's relationship with others?
7. Discuss the following characters as to their true-to-life characteristics and their impact on the story: Meg, Beth, Amy, Laurie, Aunt March, Mr. Lawrence, Marmee, Jo.
8. Discuss the enduring qualities of this book. Many scholars and readers think that this book has little appeal to modern adolescents. What do you think?
9. The manners, dress, means of transportation, whole way of life depicted in this book belong to another time. Have we totally lost the “gentility” this family exudes? Which aspects of their lives would benefit us and our children today?
10. Was Jo right to turn down Laurie's proposal? How would a twentieth century teenager have reacted?
11. How do you relate now, as an adult, to this book? What are the differences in your response to the book? Do you read it as a parent with your own children in mind, as a wife, as an interested adult or for the purpose of re-experiencing your own childhood?

## Lord of the Flies

*Lord of the Flies* is a novel by Nobel Prize-winning author William Golding about a group of British boys stuck on a deserted island who try to govern themselves, with disastrous results. Its stances on the already-controversial subjects of human nature and individual welfare versus the common good earned it position 68 on the American Library Association's list of the 100 most frequently challenged books of 1990–1999. In 2005 the novel was chosen by *TIME* magazine as one of the 100 best English-language novels from 1923 to 2005. It was awarded a place on both lists of Modern Library 100 Best Novels, reaching #41 on the editor's list, and #25 on the reader's list.

Published in 1954, *Lord of the Flies* was Golding's first novel. Although it was not a great success at the time—selling fewer than 3,000 copies in the United States during 1955 before going out of print—it soon went on to become a best-seller, and by the early 1960s was required reading in many schools and colleges; the novel is currently renowned for being a popular choice of study for GCSE English Literature courses in the United Kingdom. It was adapted to film in 1963 by Peter Brook, and again in 1990 by Harry Hook.

### Author Information

William Golding was born in Cornwall in 1911 and was educated at Marlborough Grammar School and at Brasenose College, Oxford. Apart from writing, his occupations included being a schoolmaster, a lecturer, an actor, a sailor, and a musician. He taught at Bishop Wordsworth's School, Salisbury. He joined the Royal Navy in 1940, saw action against battleships (at the sinking of the *Bismarck*), submarines and aircraft, and finished as Lieutenant in command of a rocket ship. He was present off the French coast for the D-Day invasion, and later at the island of Walcheren. After the war he returned to teaching, and began to write again. *Lord of the Flies*, his first novel, was published in 1954. It was filmed by Peter Brook in 1963. In 1980 he won the 'Booker Prize' for his novel *Rites of Passage*. He retired from teaching in 1962. After that, he lived in Wiltshire, listing his recreations as music, sailing, archaeology and classical Greek. William Golding died on June 19, 1993.

## Discussion Questions for Lord of the Flies

1. What qualities of the boys' behavior -- especially Ralph's and Jack's -- stands out for you in the first few chapters? For instance, Ralph wants to be rescued. Jack wants to get meat. What is the deeper source of tension between Ralph and Jack? Is it mainly an ego battle? A struggle for dominance? Or is it a fundamental clash of values?
2. Besides Ralph and Jack, the book contains other interesting characters such as Piggy, Simon, Roger, and Samneric. Which of these were most interesting or memorable for you? Why?
3. The group of boys quickly forms an *ad hoc* social order with Ralph, Jack, and Piggy in leadership roles and the conch as a symbol. They have meetings and assign responsibilities. Is such behavior instinctive for pre-adolescent boys, or would it have been modeled after the larger society that they were part of? How much are boys of that age capable of understanding the adult social order?
4. What is all this talk about beasts and fears, nightmares, and twisty snakelike things? What is the beast? A downed parachutist? A pig's head covered with flies? Is it real? Imagined? Does it matter? Could it be the primitive and irrational element in us all, no matter what age? Is it possible, even for civilized adults, to kill the beast?
5. Gradually the boys' behavior becomes more savage. They paint their faces and grow long hair. Jack knocks off Piggy's specs. The fire goes out. The littleuns scream and have bad dreams. The initial social order disintegrates, and Jack and his hunters take control. "The world, that understandable and lawful world, was slipping away." The chant, "Kill the pig," goes forth. What is causing the social fabric to tear?
6. The arrival of the British Navy gunboat at the end, as the island is burning, reintroduces the element of adult civilization and order to the tale. The officer is at first amused and then dismayed by the boys' appearance and conduct. He says he should have expected better from "a pack of British boys." Why? Because they were British? Because they were boys?

## **Passages West: Nineteen Stories of Youth and Identity**

*Passages West*, edited by Hugh Nichols, is an anthology of nineteen short stories about coming of age in the West. Selections by writers including Ivan Doig, Norman Maclean, Wallace Stegner, Mary Clearman Blew, and Vardis Fisher chronicle the anxieties and joys of young people searching for identity in a distinctive landscape.

### **Author Information**

Hugh Nichols, from 1971 to 1999, was Professor of English and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Lewis–Clark State College in Lewiston. He has written about H. L. David, Norman Maclean, Dorothy Johnson, and other Western writers.

## Discussion Questions for Passages West

1.

## **Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry**

This story by Mildred Taylor (1976) is set in the 1930's, but it is a book that would not have been written for and distributed to children at that time. It chronicles a year in the life of fourth grader Cassie Logan, the second of four children in a black farming family in Mississippi. Cassie comes to consciousness in this year—consciousness of racial discrimination, consciousness of her father's gifts to her of dignity and determination, and her mother's gift of the value of education. Cassie tells her story in the first person, thus richly conveying her terror of the "night riders," her resourcefulness at revenge, her affection for her family, her dawning awareness of pride in her heritage and her land. In the detailing of that gradual awakening, Taylor neither denies harsh reality nor lets it suffocate her protagonist. Despite the bleak ugliness of some of the incidents in the novel, *Roll of Thunder* is an affirmation of the good qualities in humans. Cassie, though at times humiliated and discouraged, is never completely downtrodden. In addition, most of the book transcends color: here are good and bad people of both races, and each character is drawn realistically with strengths and weaknesses. Taylor won the prestigious Newbery Medal for this novel. (Source: theme pamphlet by Elizabeth R. Baer, for American Library Association, 1984.)

### **Author Information**

Mildred D. Taylor was born in Jackson, Mississippi, on September 13, 1943. She is the daughter of Wilbert Lee and Deletha Marie (Davis) Taylor. Even though she was born in the South, she did not grow up there. Yet, for Ms. Taylor, the South still holds pleasant memories as the home of her family. When she was only three months old, her parents moved her and her sister to live in the North. They moved to a newly-integrated Ohio town called Toledo. When she went to school, she was the only black child in her class. Her father decided to leave the South in the mid-1940's because he did not want his children to live their lives as he had lived his, in a segregated, racist society that allowed little or no opportunity to blacks. Taylor attended the University of Toledo. After graduation she joined the Peace Corps in Ethiopia as an English and history teacher for two years. When she returned, she attended the University of Colorado School of Journalism. She earned a Master of Arts degree there. While she was attending school, she worked with university officials and fellow students in structuring a Black Studies program at the university. Now she is a writer living in Colorado.

## Discussion Questions for *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*

1. Does the author demonstrate her hope for the future in this book? How?
2. Have you ever felt yourself to be the victim of prejudice, racial, social, sexual, religious, etc.? How did you deal with it?
3. This book presents disturbing incidents about racism and prejudice. It also challenges readers with a serious and complex plot and themes. Is it an appropriate book for children? Why or why not?
4. What are some positive values portrayed in the story?
5. List ways the lives of the white and black children are different in this novel. Are there any parallels today in Idaho communities?
6. What is the value of presenting a story that may provide experiences foreign to our own children's and grandchildren's lives?
7. What is the significance of "the land" in this novel? What is its importance to the Logans? To Mr. Granger? To the story itself?
8. In what ways do you think young people today could relate to this novel? What relevance could it have for any of us today?
9. What is one of the scenes that you find most notable in the book? Feel free to read a passage from the scene and explain why it is notable to you.
10. Mr. Morrison is associated with thunder in the book. His voice sounds like thunder and he sings to the thunder while guarding the Logan family home. What is the significance of Mr. Morrison being associated with thunder?
11. Many of us lived through the turbulent 60's when the Civil Rights Amendments were finally enacted, and so many adult readers might understand the history, background, and setting of this novel. How would a young reader access this novel? If you prepared the reader from an historical perspective, would you do it before, during, or after reading?
12. This novel is autobiographical. Do you feel it is an honest story in representing rural society in the South in the 1930's?
13. Aside from the social history lesson, the story is about Cassie's growth. Discuss her character and what she learns as the novel progresses.
14. Did reading this book make you want to know more about this family and this time in our history? (Taylor has written several other novels using her childhood experiences as a basis: *Let the Circle Be Unbroken*, *The Road to Memphis*, *The Well*).

## Tatterhood and Other Tales

Tatterhood is a collection of folk tales from around the world—old stories about magic and adventure. These 25 traditional tales come from Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Americas. These are stories that ordinary people in the past told to entertain their families and friends. The stories were not originally thought of as “children’s tales,” but generations of children have loved hearing them. All the central characters are spirited females – while they are not superior, they are decisive heroes of extraordinary courage, wit, and achievement who set out to determine their own fate. Some of their stories are comic, some adventurous, some eerie, and some magical. The Chicago Sun–Times writes: "A sparkling gathering of traditional, yet little–known, tales from all parts of the globe. The female characters... manage to outsmart, outdo, and over–power the villains with nerves of steel, cunning minds, and disarming senses of humor." The *Introduction* offers more detailed information on the history and nature of folk tales, and brief endnotes tell a little more about each tale.

## Author Information

Ethel Johnston Phelps holds a master’s degree in Medieval Literature; she is co–editor of a Ricardian journal and has published articles on fifteenth–century subjects. A native Long Islander, her activities have included acting, writing, and directing in radio drama and community theater. Three of her one–act plays have been produced. Her other books include *Maid of the North*.

## Discussion Questions for Tatterhood and Other Tales

1.

## The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

The novel opens with Arnold's explanation of the fact that he was born with an excess of cerebral spinal fluid in his skull (an event that he describes as being "born with water on the brain"). The brain damage that resulted from this and the surgery that he went through in order to remove some of the fluid left Arnold with many physical problems: he has forty-two teeth; is skinny; has an over-sized head, hands, and feet; has poor eyesight; and experiences frequent seizures, stutters, and lisps. Mistreated by others on the reservation because of these problems, Arnold is regularly beaten up and given such nicknames as "retard" (for the brain damage that he has sustained) and "globe" (for his large head). His family, like the majority of the other reservation families, is incredibly poor: This point is emphasized when Arnold's adopted dog Oscar begins to suffer from intense heat exhaustion and Arnold's father is forced to kill Oscar with a rifle to avoid having to pay the expensive veterinary treatment necessary to save him. Arnold's teacher, Mr. P, having seen many bright Spokane Indians (among them Arnold's sister) lose hope and a desire to succeed after experiencing life on the reservation, believes that Arnold, a relatively bright student, deserves more than what he will get from continuing to live where he is now.

### Author Information

Sherman Alexie, a Spokane/Coeur d'Alene Indian, was born in 1966 on the Spokane Indian Reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. He received his B.A. in American studies from Washington State University in Pullman. His books of poetry include *Face* (Hanging Loose, 2009), *One Stick Song* (2000), *The Man Who Loves Salmon* (1998), *The Summer of Black Widows* (1996), *Water Flowing Home* (1995), *Old Shirts & New Skins* (1993), *First Indian on the Moon* (1993), *I Would Steal Horses* (1992), and *The Business of Fancydancing* (1992). He is also the author of several novels and collections of short fiction including *Flight* (Grove Press, 2007); *Ten Little Indians* (2003); *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000); *Indian Killer* (1996); *Reservation Blues* (1994), which won the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award; and *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), which received a Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award. Alexie and Chris Eyre wrote the screenplay for the movie *Smoke Signals*, which was based on Alexie's short story "This is What it Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona." The movie won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998 and was released internationally by Miramax Films. He is also a three-time world heavyweight poetry slam champion. Alexie lives with his wife and son in Seattle, Washington.

## Discussion Questions for The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian

1. From the book's opening sentence, Arnold bursts onto the scene with a brash and funny style that punctures pretense and pulls no punches. He claims to be a "truth teller," but do you trust him? Are there different types of truth? For instance, how can this book be the absolute truth if it's fiction?
2. What do you make of Mr. P's pep talk to Arnold after being hit by the book? What is all the talk about killing Indians? Do you agree that staying on the rez would mean being killed? Is this more true for Arnold than for other Indian children? Isn't leaving the rez just another way of "killing the Indian"? Why? Or why not?
3. Discuss the adults in Arnold's life -- Mr. P, his parents, his grandparents, his grandmother, Eugene, his basketball coach. What sort of role models do they provide? Do your impressions of them change over the course of the story? What does Arnold come to understand about them?
4. What are some of the more important differences between life in Welpinit and in Reardan? How do those differences reinforce or contradict traditional stereotypes of the two cultures? How do they affect a young person's chances of living a successful and fulfilling life? How well does Arnold manage to integrate the two cultures in his life?
5. After Grandmother Spirit's death, followed by Eugene's and Bobby's, and a short time later by his sister's, Arnold is torn between waves of confused emotions. How does he deal with the grief, and what is it that helps restore his hope?
6. As Arnold points out several times, alcohol is a big problem on the reservation, and it is implicated in both his sister's death and Eugene's. But is it the cause of those deaths, or merely the symptom of a deeper cause? Or are the alcohol abuse and other problems so deeply intertwined that they can no longer be sorted out?
7. At the end of the book, Arnold again asks Rowdy to join him at Reardan, and again Rowdy refuses, but this time with understanding, even admiration. What has changed? What has Rowdy learned, and why does he choose to remain on the rez?

## The Bean Trees

Marietta Greer leaves home in a beat-up '55 Volkswagen bug, determined to get away and to avoid pregnancy. Heading west and savoring her freedom, she changes her name to "Taylor" when her car runs out of gas in Taylorville, Illinois. A forlorn Cherokee woman drops a baby in Taylor's passenger seat and asks her to take it, and she does. Taylor names the little girl "Turtle," because she clings with an unrelenting, reptilian grip. With Turtle in tow, Taylor lands in Tucson, Arizona, with two flat tires at an auto repair shop called Jesus Is Lord Used Tires. It also happens to be a sanctuary for Central American refugees. Taylor meets the human condition head-on, as she experiences motherhood, responsibility and independence. The heart of this funny, inspiring book is its affirmation of risk-taking, long and friendship, abandonment and belonging, commitment and everyday miracles.

## Author Information

Barbara Kingsolver was born in 1955 and grew up in rural Kentucky. She earned degrees in biology from DePauw University and the University of Arizona and she has worked as a freelance writer and author since 1985. At various times in her adult life she has lived in England, France, and the Canary Islands, and has worked in Europe, Africa, Asia, Mexico, and South America. She spent two decades in Tucson, Arizona, before moving to southwestern Virginia where she currently resides.

Her books include *The Bean Trees*, *Homeland*, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike*, *Animal Dreams*, *Another America*, *Pigs in Heaven*, *High Tide in Tucson*, *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Prodigal Summer*, *Small Wonder*, *Last Stand: America's Virgin Lands*, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life*, *The Lacuna*, and *Flight Behavior*.

Kingsolver was named one of the most important writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century by Writers Digest. In 2000 She received the National Humanities Medal, our country's highest honor for service through the arts. In 2011, Kingsolver was awarded the Dayton Literary Peace Prize for the body of her work.

## Discussion Questions for The Bean Trees

1. What were your thoughts about the book? Which parts were most meaningful to you?
2. What does the title mean in relation to the book? It obviously relates to the wisteria plants on page 143, but what else?
3. The novel deals with lots of serious and heavy issues—child (sexual) abuse, illegal immigration, depression (p. 173), divorce, etc. Did you find the book to be depressing or uplifting? Why?
4. The support and encouragement Taylor gets from mother seems to be the source of much of her confidence. How does her view of Taylor on p. 10 compare to the way Taylor treats Turtle? What about the other mother figures in the book—LouAnn, Esperanza, and Mattie? How do their approaches to parenthood relate to Taylor's?
5. Did Taylor do the right thing in keeping Turtle in Chapter 1 (pp.18–19)? If not, what do you think she should have done?
6. Taylor and Turtle arrive in Tucson with no money, flat tires, and no friends. Yet they are able to survive and thrive. What makes this possible? Is it believable to you?
7. The novel seems to take a very sympathetic view of illegal immigrants, focusing on the suffering and loss they experienced back home (pp. 134), as well as the difficulties they face within the United States. Does this portrayal seem realistic to you? Does it influence your own views about immigration?
8. There are very few men in the book, with the exception of Estevan. Did that seem like a strength or a weakness of the novel? What is the effect of reading about a female-dominated story?
9. In Chapter 16, Taylor gets Estevan and Esperanza to pose as Turtle's Cherokee relatives to allow her to adopt Turtle legally. What do you think of this decision?

## The Enders Hotel

In the center of the rural boomtown of Soda Springs, Idaho, stands the historic Enders Hotel, Café, and Bar, a three-story brick building that has been many things to many people. But to one family who bought it as an attempt to renew themselves it was home, a place they desperately tried to hold on to and yet, after seventeen years of living there, the very place from which they wanted to escape.

Growing up under its leaking roof, Brandon R. Schrand watched a cast of broken characters pass through the hotel doors—an alcoholic artist, a forgotten boxing champ, an ex-con, a homeless family—and tried to find his own identify among those revolving faces. Haunted by a father he had never seen, he tested the faces of those drifters for familiarity. Winner of the River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize, *The Enders Hotel* reveals the promises and warnings of western boomtown life—stories of alcoholism, murder, betrayal, hope, and finally, redemption.

### Author Information

Brandon R. Schrand is the author of *The Enders Hotel: A Memoir*, the 2007 River Teeth Literary Nonfiction Prize winner, a 2008 School Library Journal Best Adult Books for High School Students selection, and a 2008 Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Utne Reader*, *Tin House*, *Shenandoah*, *The Missouri Review*, *Columbia*, *Colorado Review*, *Green Mountains Review*, *River Teeth*, *Ecotone*, *Isotope*, and numerous other publications. He also has essays forthcoming in several anthologies including *Borne on Air: Essays by Idaho Writers* (EWU Press); *Now Write!: Nonfiction Writing Exercises From Today's Best Writers and Teachers* (Tarcher/Penguin); and *The Book of Dads: Essays on the Joys, Perils, and Humiliations of Fatherhood* (Ecco/Harper Collins). He has won the 2006 Willard R. Espy Award, *Shenandoah's* 2008 Carter Prize, the Pushcart Prize, two Pushcart Prize Special Mentions, and has had Notable Essays in both the Best American Essays 2007 and 2008. A two-time grant recipient of the Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, he lives in Moscow, Idaho, with his wife and two children where he coordinates the MFA Program in Creative Writing at the University of Idaho.

## Discussion Questions for The Enders Hotel

1. What expectations does the brief opening chapter, “Restless Men,” create for the reader?
2. Schrand refers to his first stepfather, Kent, as a mean drunk—“He was violent when he drank, and he drank often. It is the oldest of stories.” What makes this “the oldest of stories?” What other “same old stories” do you find in this work?
3. Grandfather has emphysema; Brandon is asthmatic. Talk about how characters struggle to breathe in this memoir in a metaphorical sense.
4. Great-grandfather Albert Beus was a bootlegger, while Shrand’s grandfather formed a local Alcoholics Anonymous group. Alcohol flows throughout this story. Talk about the opposing influences of alcohol and AA on the characters.
5. The Enders Hotel is a three-story “brick mammoth” at the center of town. Could it be a symbol for rootedness? How does it provide a sense of home, however briefly, for a footloose cast? It was built by immigrants—travelers, too—but they had settled in one place for 30+ years. They put down roots and stayed. How did the early generation of immigrants differ from this current cast of wayfarers?
6. The Beuses helped all sorts of people but ordered Kenny to stay out of the place. Why is he such an outcast in a collection of misfits—beyond the limits of their sympathy and generosity?
7. Schrand talks about the “hauntingly tentative” nature of trying to stay sober. Is that an old story, too--the tentativeness of trying to sober up and recover from addiction? Are the families of alcoholics and addicts never on solid ground?
8. Grandmother had a mastectomy without telling her husband. “It was just one of those things I had to do by myself.” Where do you see examples of strength and stoicism in this story?
9. Talk about how tides of boom and droughts of bust shape the story of America’s West.
10. Two men died of CO poisoning in their car in the parking lot, and all evidence was removed before the breakfast crowd arrived: “just a few leaves of paperwork” In his search for his history, his identity, his legacy, is Brandon trying to avoid being one of those anonymous enders?
11. One reviewer said longing is the central theme of this memoir: “the longing of a boy to be a man, the longing of the man to connect with the boy he once was, and the longing of a son for a father he never knew.” (Western American Literature) Would you agree? What other themes can you identify?
12. Why does Brandon envy his cousins? What role does the ranch play in this memoir in contrast to The Enders?
13. Discuss Brandon’s ambivalence toward the Enders: At times, he clings to it as his home and is “devastated” when he has to move away; at other times, he resents living in a hotel and can’t wait to leave Soda Springs. He doesn’t want his grandmother to sell it, even though he says, “It killed Grandpa.” Finally, he seems offended that the new owners omitted his family’s story from the history of the hotel. Talk about the author’s assertion that “a place can be a complicated thing.”
14. Brandon’s family seems to always be in the business of renovation. He suggests that the family, though, was the end product. How was their self-renovation successful or not?

## The Old Man and the Sea

*The Old Man and the Sea* invites, even demands, reading on multiple levels. For example, readers can receive the novella as an engaging and realistic story of Santiago, the old man; Manolin, the young man who loves him; and Santiago's last and greatest battle with a giant marlin. However, the novella also clearly fits into the category of *allegory* — a story with a surface meaning and one or more under-the-surface meanings. Likewise, the characters become much more than themselves or even types — they become *archetypes* (universal representations inherited from the collective consciousness of our ancestors and the fundamental facts of human existence). From this perspective, Santiago is mentor, spiritual father, old man, or old age; and Manolin is pupil, son, boy, or youth. Santiago is the great fisherman and Manolin his apprentice — both dedicated to fishing as a way of life that they were born to and a calling that is spiritually enriching and part of the organic whole of the natural world. Santiago, as the greatest of such fishermen and the embodiment of their philosophy, becomes a solitary human representative to the natural world. He accepts the inevitability of the natural order, in which all creatures are both predator and prey, but recognizes that all creatures also nourish one another. He accepts the natural cycle of human existence as part of that natural order, but finds within himself the imagination and inspiration to endure his greatest struggle and achieve the intangibles that can redeem his individual life so that even when destroyed he can remain undefeated.

### Author Information

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961), born in Oak Park, Illinois, started his career as a writer in a newspaper office in Kansas City at the age of seventeen. After the United States entered the First World War, he joined a volunteer ambulance unit in the Italian army. Serving at the front, he was wounded, was decorated by the Italian Government, and spent considerable time in hospitals. After his return to the United States, he became a reporter for Canadian and American newspapers and was soon sent back to Europe to cover such events as the Greek Revolution. During the twenties, Hemingway became a member of the group of expatriate Americans in Paris, which he described in his first important work, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Equally successful was *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the study of an American ambulance officer's disillusionment in the war and his role as a deserter. Hemingway used his experiences as a reporter during the civil war in Spain as the background for his most ambitious novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Among his later works, the most outstanding is the short novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). His straightforward prose, his spare dialogue, and his predilection for understatement are particularly effective in his short stories, some of which are collected in *Men Without Women* (1927) and *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories* (1938). Hemingway died in Idaho in 1961.

## Discussion Questions for *The Old man and the Sea*

1. Is this really about an old man and the sea? Or is it about an old man and a fish? Or about an old man and a young boy? Or maybe these are all bound up together. Certainly, the sea and the fish dominate the old man's attention for most of the tale, yet he also says that he likes to go out alone "beyond all the people in the world," but he wishes he had the boy with him. He says, "I told the boy I was a strange old man . . . Now is when I must prove it." What *is* he trying to prove?

2. Speaking of the fish, he says, "He is my brother, but I must kill him." He claims to love the fish, yet he will kill it. Why does this fish mean so much to him? How are they alike? Do you see any parallels between the old man's quest for the fish and Ahab's search for Moby Dick? How are they similar, and how are they different?

3. At one point the old man compares himself to Joe DiMaggio. At another, he recalls an arm wrestling match with a Negro. What's the point? Is this just an instance of an old guy trying to prove his manhood to himself and a young boy? Or is it some sort of spiritual quest? Or possibly both? What if he hadn't caught the fish? Would he have considered himself a failure?

4. During the shark attack, he feels regret about the way things have turned out, but reflects, "'Do not think about sin . . . There are enough problems without sin. Also, I have no understanding of it," and "You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman." To what extent could this internal conversation be seen as a meditation on killing?

5. Although for much of the book, not much happens, the old man is an acute observer of nature. He notices many details of water, lines, birds, clouds, and sea life. Even his thoughts seem to be concrete and image based, rather than abstract and philosophical. The sentences are mostly short and straightforward, the vocabulary lean and spare. The main characters don't even have names. Did you find this narrative style effective? Did it hold your attention throughout?

6. A man, a boy, and a fish, which also appears to be male -- this would certainly appear to be a masculine story, perhaps one that says something about a distinctly male way of being in the world, one that is being passed down from generation to generation. What are the characteristics of this ethos? Is it exclusively masculine, or is it something that women can also relate to?

## The Secret Life of Bees

The Secret Life of Bees is a 2002 historical novel by American author Sue Monk Kidd. Set in the American South in 1964, the year of the Civil Rights Act and intensifying racial unrest, Sue Monk Kidd's *The Secret Life of Bees* is a story of coming-of-age, of the ability of love to transform our lives, and the often unacknowledged longing for the universal feminine divine. Addressing the wounds of loss, betrayal, and the scarcity of love, Kidd demonstrates the power of women coming together to heal those wounds, to mother each other and themselves, and to create a sanctuary of true family and home. It received much critical acclaim and was a *New York Times* bestseller. It was nominated for the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction and was adapted into a 2008 film by Gina Prince-Bythewood.

## Author Information

Sue Monk Kidd, born in Sylvester, Georgia, graduated from Texas Christian University with a B.S. in nursing in 1970 and worked throughout her twenties as a Registered Nurse and college nursing instructor. She got her start in writing when a personal essay she wrote for a writing class was published in *Guideposts* and reprinted in *Reader's Digest*. She went on to become a Contributing Editor at *Guideposts*. Her first books, *God's Joyful Surprise* (Harper San Francisco, 1988) and *When the Heart Waits* (Harper San Francisco, 1990), were spiritual memoirs describing her experiences in contemplative Christianity. *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (Harper San Francisco, 1996) introduced themes from feminist theology. Her first novel, *The Secret Life of Bees* (Viking, 2002), was written over three and a half years. It has been produced on stage in New York by The American Place Theater and been adapted into a movie by Fox Searchlight, starring Dakota Fanning, Queen Latifah, Jennifer Hudson, Alicia Keys and Sophie Okonedo. Her second novel, *The Mermaid Chair*, was published in 2005, and made into a Lifetime movie of the same name. In 2006, *Firstlight*, a collection of Kidd's early writings was released in hardcover by Guideposts Books and in paperback by Penguin in 2007. This compilation of inspirational stories, spiritual essays, and meditations has been translated into several languages and has over 200,000 copies in print. Kidd's new book, *Traveling with Pomegranates*, co-authored with her daughter Ann, is a mother daughter travel memoir due out in 2009. Kidd has acknowledged Henry David Thoreau, Kate Chopin, Thomas Merton, and Carl Jung as influences. Kidd is currently Writer in Residence at Phoebe Pember House in Charleston, where she lives with her husband, Sanford (Sandy) Kidd, two children, Bob and Ann, and a black lab, Lily.

## Discussion Questions for *The Secret Life of Bees*

1. Right from the start, Lily comes across as a complex and interesting narrator. How would you describe her feelings for her mother? For T. Ray? For Rosaleen? For bees?
2. Despite the many differences between them, Lily and Rosaleen share a strong bond. What is the source of their closeness and how does it survive the many changes in both of their lives over the course of the book?
3. While Lily is staying with the Calendar sisters, she is introduced to the Daughters of Mary, their traditions, stories, and rituals, including the Lady of Chains. Would you call this a religion? At one point, August tells Lily, "You see, every body needs a God who looks like them." Otis, a man, can participate in the ceremony, but not Lily. Why not?
4. This book is also about stories and storytelling. What are some of the stories that are told within the book? Who tells them and why? Pick one story and tell how it relates to the larger themes and issues in the book.
5. Bees and beekeeping are important elements of the story. Besides being a central focus of life with the Calendar sisters, they also have symbolic overtones that resonate throughout. Discuss how the bee lore contributes to the story. How do the bees help reveal character? How do bees resemble humans? How do they differ? Why are they so important to the people in the story? Be sure to consider the title: What *is* their secret life?
6. At fourteen, somewhere between childhood innocence and the complexities of adulthood, Lily tries to sort out and understand who she is so she can break free of the inner turmoil that haunts her and unchain herself from her past. In the end she appears to have succeeded. What events and people have helped her? How? And why?
7. This book is set in 1964 in a small town in South Carolina, but here we are now in Idaho, reading and discussing it. What aspects of the story seem unique to that time and place? What themes, characters, and incidents reach beyond that time and place to speak to you as a reader, here and now?

## The Wind in the Willows

Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Grahame (1908) presents a fantasy world peopled by males only, free from constraints, demands, and responsibilities. Kenneth Grahame began this book unwittingly, by telling bedtime stories and writing letters about Toad and Rat to his only child, Alastair. But is it a book for children? Peter Green, Grahame's biographer comments: "There has been much discussion as to whether *The Wind in the Willows* is indeed a pleasure for all ages, is a book for children or for adults. It is both. For children, a fantasy world that triumphantly fuses disparate levels of reality; for adults, hauntingly evocative language and demure social satire; for both, that immensely potent myth." Perhaps it is this very duality that makes the book so well-loved: while on the one hand decrying encroaching technology and materialism, Grahame lauds the pleasures of sumptuous feasting and bodily comfort. The book's structure itself seems to reflect this duality by use of alternating chapters: one full of action with Toad and his motorcar, the next a discursive, philosophical reflection on the joys of rural life. (Source: Theme pamphlet by Elizabeth R. Baer, for American Library Association, 1984).

### Author Information

Kenneth Grahame was born on March 8, 1859, and was orphaned by the time he was five years old. He went to live with his grandmother in Cookham Dene, Berkshire. He attended St. Edward's School there, and at the age of 17 began working as a clerk for the Bank of England. He stayed on, was promoted several times, eventually holding the position of Permanent Secretary. He married Elspeth Thomson in 1899. Grahame wrote essays which were published in the 'National Observer,' and many well-received sketches of childhood – some about orphaned siblings – for various publications. He was nostalgic, appreciative of nature, and sensitive to the lives of children; some of the stories which comprise *The Wind in the Willows* were originally written as letters, others were invented as bedtime stories – all in order to amuse his young son, who died in an accident in 1920. Grahame died in 1932.

## Discussion Questions for *Wind in the Willows*

1. How are time and perspective woven into the story?
2. Discuss the human characteristics and values portrayed through animals in the story.
3. What does the wind in *Wind in the Willows* symbolize?
4. Is this a book you would want to share with your children or grandchildren?
5. Is the story still relevant today?
6. Reviewer Richard Middleton in *Vanity Fair* wrote: “The book for me is notable for its intimate sympathy with nature and for its delicate expression of emotions. When all is said the boastful, unstable Toad; the hospitable Water Rat; the shy, wise, childlike Badger; and the Mole with his pleasant habit of brave boyish impulse, are neither animals nor men, but are types of that deeper humanity which sways us all.” Do you agree with this statement?
7. Where did Grahame get Ratty, Toad, Mole, and Badger, and, more important, why?
8. Peter Green, Grahame’s biographer, says of *Wind in the Willows*, “Its symbolism embodies some of mankind’s deepest and most ineradicable yearnings: the pastoral dream, the Golden Age, the search for lost innocence.” Others see Grahame’s book focusing on friendship, home, and “right action.” Are there other values that you found in your reading? Are these values still meaningful? How do they play out in our modern world?
9. Each chapter has at least one visually memorable event. Because these events usually require motion and often evoke other senses besides sight and sound, they often are not illustrated. Choose several chapters in which the climactic scene is not illustrated in your book and explain what you would see, hear, smell, feel, etc. if a multimedia, multisensory “illustration” could be created. Don’t forget taste!

## The Women of Brewster Place

In her heralded first novel, Gloria Naylor weaves the truths and the myths of seven women living in Brewster Place, a bleak inner-city sanctuary, into a powerful, moving portrait of the strengths, struggles, and hopes of black women in today's America. Vulnerable and resilient, openhanded and openhearted, these women forge their lives in a place that in turn threatens and protects—a common prison and a shared home. Naylor renders painful and very ugly human experiences with simple eloquence and uncommon intuition. Her ability to establish a memorable sense of place and history makes *The Women of Brewster Place* a remarkable literary accomplishment and a contemporary classic.

### Author Information

Gloria Naylor, first child of Alberta McAlpin and Roosevelt Naylor, was born in New York City on January 25th, 1950. Although she grew up in the largest urban center in the U.S., her roots were in the south since her parents had been sharecroppers in Robinsonville, Mississippi. Naylor's parents taught self-validation, independence, and self-confidence. Naylor's personality resembles her mother's—timid, quiet, and shy. She also shares her mother's love of reading and libraries. In 1963 Naylor and her family moved to Queens, a more middle-class borough, which increased Naylor's awareness of racism. Also in the same year, Naylor's mother joined the Jehovah's Witnesses and in 1968 Naylor followed in her footsteps. The Jehovah's Witnesses brought her out of her shyness and gave her a cause, community and opportunity for travel. They encouraged her already active imagination and believed in the power of the written word, which would have obvious importance to Naylor in the future. Unfortunately, the Jehovah's Witnesses also isolated her from her own culture. There was an incredible explosion of black literature at the time and Naylor didn't even realize it. She witnessed for seven years, supporting herself as a switchboard operator, but eventually left the Jehovah's Witnesses because "things weren't getting better, but worse." What followed for Naylor were years of transformation. From 1975–1981 she worked full-time as a switchboard operator, pursued writing and attended classes at Medgar Evers College, and eventually Brooklyn College. She discovered feminism and African-American literature which revitalized her and gave her new ways to think about and define herself as a black woman. In 1977 Naylor read her first novel by an African-American woman, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, which gave her the courage to write. She began writing fiction in 1979 and submitted a story to *Essence* magazine, whose editor advised her to continue writing. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English, completed her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, and began graduate work in Afro-American in Studies at Yale in 1981. She died in 2016.

## Discussion Questions for The Women of Brewster Place

1. Throughout the novel, Brewster Place is personified as a character itself. Is the street a protagonist or an antagonist? What effect does this have on the impact of the story and on its outcome?
2. What experiences and characteristics do the seven women characters of Brewster Place have in common? How are they different from one another? In what specific and general ways do the women support and comfort one another?
3. How solid is the logic in Butch's philosophy that life is like eating sugar cane: "You gotta know when to stop chewing..."? What are the advantages of that philosophy? What are the weaknesses of it?
4. Mattie's son Basil doesn't stay long enough to go on trial. If he had, what do you expect would have been the outcome of that trial?
5. Most of the women in this novel are mistreated by men, both emotionally and physically. Why do you suppose these men treat these women this way? In what ways do women mistreat men in this novel? Are there any positive relationships between men and women in the book? In the most violent chapter of the book, Lorraine is raped repeatedly. Why, then, does she kill poor old Ben?
6. At the end of the book, Kiswana and some of the others hope that their block party will be successful and that their Block Association will benefit from some significant changes. What do you expect are their chances for success? On what evidence do you base your opinion?
7. Using the Langston Hughes poem at the front of the book, discuss which (if any) characters in the novel exhibit the characteristics he describes. Who dries up? Who festers? Who becomes syrupy sweet? Who sags? Who explodes?
8. Some readers feel that this novel, like many novels about the experiences of poor black people, is depressing and demoralizing. Others feel that its effect is uplifting and inspiring. What do you think?
9. As the book begins, we are told how Brewster Place had been born. Throughout the story, the street lives through the existence of its residents. In the end it is dying. What causes its demise? In what ways will it never die? Would it be better off dead?
10. Dreams and memories contribute much to the substance of this book as well as to its structure. In what ways is this a useful writing device? How might it confuse some readers? What is the significance of Mattie's dream at the end of the book?

Source:

Penguin Teaching Guide, prepared by Dr. Donald R. Gallo, Professor of English, Central Connecticut State University, <https://www.penguin.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/womenbrewster.pdf>

## The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

Since it first appeared in 1900, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has brought joy to generations. In it, a girl's dream world comes to life as the cyclone lifts Dorothy from Kansas, depositing her in the enchanted land of the Munchkins. Here she meets the famous Oz characters: The Scarecrow, the Tin Woodsman, the Cowardly Lion, and the Wicked Witch of the West. Her adventures along the Yellow Brick Road to the Emerald City and the Wizard himself evoke the rich, universal appeal of a classic fairy tale.

### Author Information

Lyman Frank Baum (May 15, 1856 – May 6, 1919) was an American author of children's books, best known for writing *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. He wrote thirteen novel sequels, nine other fantasy novels, and a host of other works (55 novels in total, plus four "lost" novels, 82 short stories, over 200 poems, an unknown number of scripts, and many miscellaneous writings), and made numerous attempts to bring his works to the stage and screen. His works predicted such century-later commonplaces as television, laptop computers (*The Master Key*), wireless telephones (*Tik-Tok of Oz*), women in high risk, action-heavy occupations (*Mary Louise in the Country*), and the ubiquity of advertising on clothing (*Aunt Jane's Nieces at Work*).

## Discussion Questions for The Wonderful Wizard of Oz

1. Almost everyone will know this story, at least in outline, either from having seen the movie or perhaps having it read to them. Describe your first encounter with the tale. Was it through the book or the movie? How was this reading of the story different? Were you surprised that the Land of Oz wasn't over the rainbow, but across a desert? Did you notice any satire or other social comment that escaped you earlier?

2. Setting off on her quest for OZ, and ultimately for Kansas, Dorothy collects three companions, each with a particular shortcoming. How real or important are these deficits? For instance, how are they tested in the dark wood? Why shouldn't the Scarecrow want a heart and the Tin Woodman a brain? Does the Tin Woodman seem smarter than the Scarecrow?

3. The Great Oz has quite a reputation, but are there early hints that it may not be wholly deserved? Did you catch on before Dorothy as to why the green glasses were required in the Emerald City? Does Oz, in his various forms, remind you of any other leaders or rulers in literature or in life? How does your opinion of him change after he is exposed?

4. Wicked witches, wildcats, hammerheads, a giant spider, wolves and crows and killer bees, slavery and black magic, and, of course, the nearly lethal red poppies -- there is clearly a dark side to the Land of Oz. Is this too much for young children? Do you recall being disturbed or frightened by any of this as a child?

5. The Tin Woodman, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion, even the Wizard himself have been changed significantly by events. But what of Dorothy? How much and in what ways has she changed by the time she arrives back in Kansas? She couldn't bring back the silver slippers, but has she brought anything back? What might she have gained or lost?

6. Some readers have seen the story, though written by a man, as an early example of a feminist children's tale featuring a strong, capable, and self-confident little girl who helps the male characters overcome their self-doubts and succeed while reaching her own goals as well. Others claim that in returning home, she consigns herself to a dull, uninspiring future on an isolated Kansas farm. What do you think?

## When We Were Romans

Lawrence and his little sister Jemima find themselves uprooted and off to a new life in Rome with their mother who has decided they must leave England. Life becomes a catalogue of sofa-surfing homelessness and uncertainty for the family, with all the hopes and anxieties of the children acted out in a city dominated by its history. Lawrence embraces that history with the schoolboy enthusiasm that he also reserves for his galaxies of information on the solar system. Nine-year-old Lawrence is the man in his family. He carefully watches over his willful little sister, Jemima, and his mother, Hannah. When Hannah becomes convinced that their estranged father is stalking them, the family flees London and heads for Rome, where Hannah lived happily as a young woman. For Lawrence, fascinated by stories of popes and emperors, Rome is an adventure. Though they are short of money, and move from home to home, staying with his mother's old friends, little by little their new life seems to be taking shape. But the trouble that brought them to Italy will not quite leave them in peace. Narrated in Lawrence's perfectly rendered voice, *When We Were Romans* powerfully evokes the emotions and confusions of childhood—the triumphs, the jealousies, the fears, and the love. Even as everything he understands is turned upside down, Lawrence remains determined to keep his family together, viewing the world from a perspective that is at once endearingly innocent and preternaturally wise.

## Author Information

Matthew Kneale (born 24 November 1960) is a British writer, best known for his 2000 novel *English Passengers*, which won the prestigious Whitbread Book Award and was also shortlisted for the Booker Prize. He went to school at Latymer Upper School and then studied Modern History at Magdalen College, Oxford, and afterwards spent a year in Japan, when he began writing. He now lives in Italy. Kneale is the son of the writers Nigel Kneale and Judith Kerr. His other novels include *Whore Banquets* (1987 – winner of the 1988 Somerset Maugham Award, which was also won by his father in 1950; republished in 2002 as *Mr. Foreigner*), *Inside Rose's Kingdom* (1989), *Sweet Thames* (1992 – winner of the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize), and *When We Were Romans* (2008). In 2004, he released the short story collection *Small Crimes in an Age of Abundance*. *English Passengers* was also shortlisted for Australia's Miles Franklin Award in 2000, making Kneale the first non-Australian author to be shortlisted for the award.

## Discussion Questions for When We Were Romans

1. Most readers are struck at once by the voice and style of Lawrence, the insightful nine-year-old narrator. How do you react to this style with its frequent run-on sentences and other grammatical lapses? Do you find it engaging? Distracting? Did you get more used to it as the book progressed?
2. Early on, the book introduces tension between generations as Lawrence struggles to support his mother, without understanding the complexities of her situation. How well does he handle this? What do you make of the way she talks to and manages her children?
3. Lawrence spends a lot of time reading, and short summaries from the Space Book and Horrible Histories are interspersed throughout the book. Did you find these to be interesting and enjoyable, or did they seem more like interruptions and distractions? Did some appeal to you more than others?
4. How did Hannah, the mother, come across to you early in the book? She was obviously quite stressed before leaving England, but what of her decision to go to Rome? Did it seem desperate? Rational? Practical? Selfish? What did she seem to be looking for? Escape? A fresh start? Her lost youth?
5. Lawrence likes to identify people with the animals they resemble, then to use that animal as a nickname. Do you recall any of the characters and the animals they resembled? Did this nicknaming help you to envision them? To keep track of them? What do you make of the fact that Gabrielly had no animal?
6. Though Lawrence is only nine, he catches glimpses of the complex world of adulthood, in part through his readings, but more directly through the words and actions of his mother and her friends. Given his necessarily limited understanding of adult issues and actions, how does he manage to adapt to his life in Rome? What do you think of the way he relates to Jemima and Hermann?
7. For most of the book, we only hear about Mikie, the father, second hand, yet he hovers over events like a dark mysterious cloud. As his presence becomes more deeply felt, Hannah grows more stressed, and Lawrence gets more caught up in the tension. Readers may wonder, is Mikie really there in Rome? Is Hannah going mad? Was he ever as bad as we've been led to believe? How did you feel when you finally met him in person? At what point did you think he might not be as evil as he had been portrayed?

## Jackalope Dreams

The departed men in her life still have plenty to say to Corey. Her father, a legendary rodeo cowboy who punctuated his lifelong pronouncements with a bullet to his head, may be the loudest. But in this story of Montana—a story in which the old West meets the new and tradition has its way with just about everyone—it is Corey's voice we listen to. In this tour de force of voices big and small, sure and faltering, hers comes across resonant and clear, directing us to the heart of the matter.

Winner of the 2008 Western Heritage Award, *Jackalope Dreams* plays out against the mythology of the Old West—a powerful amalgam of ranching history, Marlboro Men, and train robbery reenactments. This story of the newly orphaned, spinsterish Corey is a sometimes comical, sometimes poignant tale of coming-of-age a little late. As she tries to recapture an old dream of becoming a painter—of preserving some modicum of true art amid the virtual reality of modern Montana—Corey finds herself figuring in other dramas as well, other, younger lives already at least as lost as her own.

## Author Information

Mary Clearman Blew grew up on a small cattle ranch in Montana, on the site of her great-grandfather's 1882 homestead. Her memoir *All But the Waltz: Essays on a Montana Family*, won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, as did her short story collection, *Runaway*. A novel, *Jackalope Dreams*, appeared in 2008 and won the Western Heritage Center's prize for fiction. Other awards include the Mahan Award for contributions to Montana literature, the Idaho Humanities Council's 2001 Award for Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities, a Handcart Award for Biography, and the Western Literature Association's Lifetime Achievement Award. In 2004, she received the "Distinguished Achievement Award" from the Western Literature Association. She is Professor of Emerita at the University of Idaho, where she has taught since 1994.

## Discussion Questions for Jackalope Dreams

1. In what ways does this novel seem to “talk back” to the mythical West and the genre Western? For example, do guns and gunplay, horses and horseback rides, private property, and the outdoors appear in expected places and ways?
2. Owen Wister’s 1902 novel *The Virginian* is credited with inaugurating the cowboy western and a number of western themes and conventions. Among the features of Wister’s novel is a cinematic eye that surveys and admires the rugged beauty of both the hero and the landscape. When we first see Wister’s *Virginian*, he moves “with the undulations of a tiger, smooth and easy, as if his muscles flowed beneath his skin.” How does Blew’s introduction of the body of her heroine depart from Wister’s introduction of *The Virginian*, or the countless films that have eyed their Gary Coopers and Clint Eastwoods with equal care and admiration? Does Blew’s novel continue its opening interest in the bodies of its characters? If so, what does the narrator show us with her eyes? In what other ways is Corey Henry like or unlike a typical western hero(ine)?
3. What does the title, *Jackalope Dreams*, mean? What does the jackalope mean to Corey? Why do you think Blew chose this title?
4. *Jackalope Dreams* is set in contemporary Montana and Blew currently lives and works in Idaho. Which of the author’s observations about contemporary Montana also apply to contemporary Idaho?
5. What do voices in Corey’s imagination add to the novel? Does she make peace with them?
6. The novel makes several references to Old and New West, or old order and new order. Is one better than the other – for Corey, or for anyone?
7. In her trilogy of family memoirs – *All But the Waltz*, *Balsamroot*, and *Writing Her Own Life* – Blew seems to replace damaging patriarchal stories with women’s stories, however mundane and unfinished. To what extent does *Jackalope Dreams* continue the work of the family memoirs, replacing a patriarchal Old Western narrative with a New Western story more life-affirming for women?