



Growing Older, Growing Wiser



Why Am I Reading This? Overview

This theme addresses the paradox of growing older and growing wiser. On the one hand is the fear and the inconvenience of growing older; on the other is the revealed wisdom and confidence of age. Each novel in this series speaks to us as individuals who are part of the growing number of aging and elderly in this country, whether we ourselves are elderly or whether we have parents, grandparents or other relatives who are aging. Reading, reflection and discussion will help address issues such as how we might proceed into this new social structure, where and how we live, and how we relate to the rest of our family and society. Some give us a glimpse into someone's life as they come to the realization of and acknowledge wisdom gained through life's experiences and relationships.

Book List

- *Balsamroot: A Memoir* by Mary Clearman Blew
- *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner
- *Empire Falls* by Richard Russo
- *Jackalope Dreams* by Mary Clearman Blew
- *Passages West: 19 Stories of Youth and Identity*, editor Hugh Nichols
- *The Memory of Old Jack* by Wendell Berry
- *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence
- *The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor
- *Tuesdays With Morrie* by Mitch Albom

Book Summaries and Discussion Questions

Balsamroot: A Memoir

In this memoir, Mary Clearman Blew traces the interlocked lives of three generations of women in the same family: Mary Blew (who now lives in Moscow, Idaho), her Aunt Imogene and mother Doris (who grew up on a failed Montana homestead), and her daughters Elizabeth and Rachel. After a life of apparent independent happiness, “Auntie” comes to live near Blew and soon begins to decline, bringing Blew to explore past lives of women in her family and to face her own longings and her own assumptions about what makes a woman’s life satisfying and full.

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 Balsamroot

1. Blew shares with us a story, “Grandsir,” that her aunt wrote (64–66). What lessons on aging are in this story?
2. “Auntie and I are locked in mortal combat for our lives.” (76). Discuss. What are the terms of the conflict? How is it eventually resolved?
3. How revealing is the author’s observation that her aunt, even in her dementia “longs for just what I secretly long for: to love and be loved”? (73)
4. At least twice (4, 61) we hear the unwritten code: “never speak aloud of what you feel deeply.” This code relates to a family trait of “distance” (136) – a lack of physical touching or display of affection. How do these traits relate to Imogene’s life story and to Blew’s internal struggles? Does the experience of aging (or confronting the problems of aging) in any way help Blew in her relationship with Elizabeth?
5. What function do Imogene’s diaries serve in the novel for the reader? For the narrator?
6. Imogene kept herself busy, always the aunt on the fringes of family. On page 192, Blew writes of Imogene’s “fear of being alone—the fear of annihilation” in connection with the way she lived her life. Comment on this idea.
7. On page 203, Blew writes “Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned—for years I would have disagreed with Yets, believed that the only heart worth having was the heart that came as a gift.” How does this sentiment tie into Imogene’s life? Into Blew’s life?
8. Blew puts together fragments from the diaries to construct the story of Imogene and Lud. What does that narrative tell us about Imogene’s life which Blew had not known? Does this knowledge bring wisdom to Blew?
9. How does Pete Daniels fit into this narrative?
10. In what way is the lowering of the Snake River in 1992 relevant to the narrative Blew is shaping for us?
11. In what ways is the horseback ride of the final chapter a fitting conclusion?

Crossing to Safety

It's deceptively simple: two bright young couples meet during the Depression and form an instant and lifelong friendship. "How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these?" Larry Morgan, a successful novelist and the narrator of the story, poses that question many years after he and his wife, Sally, have befriended the vibrant, wealthy, and often troubled Sid and Charity Lang. "Where is the high life, the conspicuous waste, the violence, the kinky sex, the death wish?" It's not here. What is here is just as fascinating, just as compelling, as touching, and as tragic. *Crossing to Safety* is about loyalty and survival in its most everyday form—the need to create bonds and the urge to tear them apart. Thirty-four years after their first meeting, when Larry and Sally are called back to the Langs' summer home in Vermont, it's as if for a final showdown. How has this friendship defined them? What is its legacy? Stegner offers answers in those small, perfectly rendered moments that make up the lives "as quiet as these"—and as familiar as our own.

Author Information

Wallace Stegner was born on February 18, 1909, in Lake Mills, Iowa. Over a 60-year career he wrote 30 books. Among the novels are, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, 1943; *Joe Hill*, 1950; *All The Little Live Things*, 1967 (Commonwealth Club Gold Medal); *Angle of Repose*, 1972 (Pulitzer Prize); *The Spectator Bird*, (National Book Award), 1977; *Recapitulation*, 1979; *Collected Stories*, 1990; and *Crossing to Safety*, 1987. The nonfiction includes *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian*, 1954; *Wolf Willow, (A History, A Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier)*, 1962; *The Sound of Mountain Water*, 1969; *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West*, 1992, a collection of essays that earned him a nomination for the National Book Critics Circle award.

Discussion Questions for Crossing to Safety

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? Who crosses to safety? What does “safety” mean? How does the novel relate to the lines from Robert Frost that serve as epigraph?
3. What is the basis of the friendship between the two couples? What keeps them bound together for so many years? Are the two couples equals, and do their differences help or hurt the relationship? It’s almost like two parallel couples in a Shakespeare play.
4. What does the book teach us about friendship? “Is that the basis of friendship? Is it as reactive as that? Do we respond only to people who seem to find us interesting? Do we all buzz or ring or light up when people press our vanity buttons, and only then? Can I think of anyone in my whole life whom I have liked without his first showing signs of liking me?”
5. What role does nature play in the novel? How does the stability of nature contrast the dynamics of the human characters?
6. Charity’s confident control is both a strength and a weakness. The tea packing scene, the injured man scene, and the final scenes of the book all show the dark side of her determination. Is her character then a tragic one? Does she grow wiser as she grows older?
7. What does Stegner suggest in the novel about the role of writers? Is Larry telling the truth when he says that writers “don’t understand any more than other people. They invent only plots they can resolve. They ask the questions they can answer.”?
8. Why structure the novel in flashbacks instead of telling the story chronologically? What do the repeated returns to the novel’s present do for our experience of the story? Perhaps relates to circular nature of the story: “In fact, if you could forget mortality, and that used to be easier here [at Battell Pond] than in most places, you could really believe that time is circular, and not linear and progressive as our culture is bent on proving.”
9. What makes an interesting life? Is it just in skillful storytelling that a life becomes fascinating? “How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these? Where are the things that novelists seize upon and readers expect? Where is the high life, the conspicuous waste, the violence, the kinky sex, the death wish?... where are speed, noise, ugliness, everything that makes us who we are and makes us recognize ourselves in fiction?”
10. What does the book suggest about the balance between planning your life and accepting what happens? How do Charity and Sally embody these two extremes? “You can plan all you want to. You can lie in your morning bed and fill whole notebooks with schemes and intentions. But within a single afternoon, within hours or minutes, everything you plan and everything you have fought to make yourself can be undone as a slug is undone when salt is poured on him. And right up to the moment when you find yourself dissolving into foam you can still believe you are doing fine.”

Empire Falls

Empire Falls author Richard Russo delves deep into the blue-collar heart of America as he tells the stories of the inhabitants of Empire Falls. This novel provides a panoramic view of small time life. It is set in a former logging and textile town in Maine. The story follows the misadventures of Miles Roby, a manager of a greasy spoon called the Empire Grill, and the problems of possible divorce, ailing mother, and his business as well as his relationship with his teenage daughter. That relationship is the age-old story of generations trying to understand one another and of the joys and heartbreaks that come out of the connection.

Author Information

Born on July 15, 1949, Richard Russo grew up in a small town in upstate New York. Russo received his B.A. in English at the University of Arizona along with his Ph.D. in American Literature in 1980. He spent a year working on his fiction writing skills while completing his dissertation and earned a Master of Fine Arts degree in creative writing in 1981. When Russo wrote his first book, *Mohawk*, he was still employed full-time as a college teacher and would work on his novels at a local diner between classes. After the success of *Nobody's Fool* (the book and the movie), he was able to give up teaching and pursue his career in writing. He retired at the age of forty-seven. Russo is known for his depiction of blue-collar life in depressed Northeastern towns and the struggles of emotionally scarred sons coming to terms with absent or abusive father figures. He has been regarded by many leading critics as the most important writer about Main Street, USA. He is a contemporary American novelist who writes well with free-handed humor about working-class life. Russo has said that he wants that which "is hilarious and that which is heartbreaking to occupy the same territory in the books because he thinks they very often occupy the same territory in life, much as we try to separate them." In 2002, Richard Russo received the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished fiction by an American author for *Empire Falls*.

Discussion Questions for Empire Falls

1. Richard Russo's description of the town of Empire Falls is as memorable and vivid as his portraits of the people who live there. How do the details he provides about the town's setting and its streets, buildings and neighborhoods create more than a physical backdrop against which the story is played out? How does the use of flashbacks strengthen the sense of the town as a "living" character?
2. "One of the good things about small towns, Miles's mother had always maintained, was that they accommodated just about everyone" [p. 21]. Is this an accurate description of Empire Falls? Which characters in particular benefit from this attitude? What influences the level of tolerance Miles is willing to extend to Max Roby, Walt Comeau and Jimmy Minty, all of whom are constant irritants to him? What does he see as the redeeming characteristics in each of them?
3. Why is his relationship with Tick so important to Miles? In what ways is it reminiscent of his mother's attachment to him? How do Grace's expectations for Miles, as well as her ultimate disappointment in him, shape the way he is raising Tick?
4. Even before the full story of Grace and Max's marriage is revealed, what hints are there that Grace was less than the ideal wife and mother Miles remembers and reveres?
5. Why does Miles choose to accept his mother's version of events of their trip to Martha's Vineyard, even though it entails a betrayal of his father [pp. 136–47]?
6. When Miles finally realizes who Charlie Mayne really is, does it change his feelings about Grace in a significant way? Would he have felt differently if Grace were still alive and able to answer his questions [pp. 338–9]?
7. How does Miles's own situation—particularly his separation from Janine and his discovery of the relationship between Charlene and David—color his reaction to his mother's affair? How does his brief conversation with Max about Grace and Charlie [p. 373] shed light on the relationship between father and son?
8. Janine calls Miles "The World's Most Transparent Man" [p. 42] and Tick says, "It's not like you don't have any [secrets] ...It's just that everybody figures them out" [p. 107]. Does Mrs. Whiting share this image of Miles? What evidence is there that she sees and understands more about the "real" Miles than the people closest to him do?
9. How does Russo use minor characters to fill out his portraits of the main figures? What roles do Horace Weymouth, Bea Majeski, Charlene and Otto Meyer play in shaping your impressions of and opinions about Miles, Janine and Tick?
10. How do David's feelings about Mrs. Whiting and the Empire Grill differ from Miles's? Whose attitude is more realistic? Is David's harsh criticism of Miles's passivity [pp. 224–5] justified? What insights does it give you into David's character? Is David more content with his life than Miles is with his own, and if so, why?
11. Empire Falls traces three very different families—the Whitings, the Robys, and the Mintys—through several generations. What does each of these families represent in terms of American society in general?

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. She has taught creative writing at the University of Idaho 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 heroine?
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?
8. Sometimes the novel is grim. Is it also funny? If so, where and why? What does it satirize?
9. Recall some western regional stereotypes that occur in this novel. How are they handled? Does Blew approach any stereotypes with humor? Which ones, and to what effect?
10. Who are the regional insiders and outsiders in this story? Do they “belong” differently to this community? Is it a good or bad thing when newcomers arrive in a small western town? Does this book suggest any solution to the problems of regional exclusiveness?
11. Westerns are notoriously violent. When is this book violent, and to what ends?
12. What is the relationship between Corey’s problems and those of the young people in this novel? How can Corey help her students? How can they help her?
13. If you have read other books by Mary Clearman Blew, you’ll notice at least two things in this book that are often important to this writer – education and horses. What does Corey learn from horses? Do horses help her relationships with *people*? What does she regret about her education? Is she a good teacher?

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. Nichols tells us in the preface that he wanted “to put good stories before readers.” How do you think these selections offer “a good read”?
2. Which of these stories made you feel the “shock of recognition” that Nichols felt when reading stories rooted in the land and the people of the West, especially of “formative experiences” of young people coming of age?
3. What are some of the questions about youth and identity at the heart of these stories?
4. Which examples of the tension between teenagers and adults stood out to you? Was it because those incidents were most relatable, or because they were more extreme?
5. Most of the books in this series, “Growing Older, Growing Wiser,” center around characters at more advanced stages of life. How does this collection about adolescents fit under the theme of “Growing Older, Growing Wiser”?
6. Why do you think death figures so prominently in these stories?
7. Talk about the need for these young characters to prove themselves, to be self-reliant and valiant. Is that true only of youth? Or does it stay with us; is it ageless and timeless? Is that need to be heroic, to somehow control events, the reason for the appeal of stories about superheroes so evident in today’s media and dating back to earliest literature?

The Memory of Old Jack

A burnished day in September 1952 provides the framework for a narrative that movingly distills the lifetime of an uncommonly admirable if very human being. *Memory of Old Jack* is a slab of rich Americana, eloquent testimony that “it’s not a tragedy when a man dies at the end of his life.” (The New York Times Book Review). “The account of Jack’s courtship of his wife is a beautiful piece of writing...and worthy of a place among the best pieces of prose written by American writers of this century.” (Library Journal). Jack Beechum is the focus of this third-person narrative. The novel, one of the “Port William membership stories,” is set in Port William, Kentucky, in 1952 when Jack is 92 years old. The narrative takes place over the chronological period of but a day; however, the present tense narrative is punctuated by Jack’s reminiscences of the major events in his life. As Jack’s life unfolds throughout these flashbacks, his character and his impact on the history of the town and its people reveal Berry’s final message. This is at once a story of Jack and his life and times, but also the effect one man’s life has on those around him.

Author Information

Wendell Berry has written over 32 books of novels, collections of poetry, and occasional essays. He is also a teacher (formerly a professor of English at Kentucky State University), a preserver of local lore, an environmentalist, and a futurist in the sense that he understands the critical needs of communities (rural and by extension urban) as the platform for the future. Since 1965 he has farmed in rural Kentucky. He has received many awards and recognitions, including the 1999 Thomas Merton Award, fellowships in both the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, an award from the National Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters (1972) and the T. S. Eliot Award.

Discussion Questions for *The Memory of Old Jack*

1. Before you started reading *The Memory of Old Jack*, what did you assume the title meant? After reading the book, do you have the same sense of the title?
2. There is a big hole at the middle of Jack's life: the failure of his marriage and family. Why do you think Berry chose to tell a life story with such a gap in it?
3. There are some very important women in Jack's life: Ruth, Rose, Clara. Do you feel that the importance of these women in Jack's life story is fully enough developed?
4. Writing is a matter of making choices. One of Berry's choices in *The Memory of Old Jack* is to provide alternate perspectives. Often we as readers are right there next to Jack or getting his memories first-hand; but often we see from the perspective of others: Mat, Andy, Hannah, Wheeler. And sometimes the narrator steps back and tells us things about Jack that Jack himself may not know or understand. How well do you think this way of telling the story works? What if we had only Jack's view? What if we had fuller perspectives from others, like Clara?
5. Jack dies in 1952. At the novel's end we get a rather dark view of the future of the community, of "the old ways," in Wheeler Catlett's meditation on p. 163. To what extent, as we look back after 50 years, does this look like good history: for this town, for Idaho, for the U.S., for the world? And why 1952?
6. Though I am more eager every year to accept the assumption implicit in the series title "Growing Older, Growing Wiser," I'm not sure that everyone accepts it. Wasn't it Thoreau who said: "We are never so wise as the day we are born"? What is the relation between growing older and growing wiser? What is wisdom anyway? How do you know it when you find it? Probably you've discussed this question earlier in this LTAI series. Whether you have or not, this may be a good closer issue for the series.
7. Old Jack Beechum's life seems to have been rather austere and joyless. Even so, his interest in the rhythm of nature and the routine on the farm apparently are enough to sustain him. Comment.
8. Would you say that Jack Beechum has a rich inner life?
9. Mat Feltner and Margaret are among the few who really respect and understand Old Jack. Mat is determined to honor Jack's wishes at the end. Comment.
10. The courtship of Nancy Beechum by Ben Feltner covers eleven years. What is your thought on that?
11. In 1888 Jack was twenty-eight. At the end of the story he is over eighty. His principal aim in life was to restore the farm consisting of about 150 acres—the work on the farm was all-important (see 30). Comment.
12. In his youth Jack was drawn to women: "he had got to be handy with the women." But all was not easy: "he knew the anger of regret for which he could find no fitting act...it was an emotion that would be one of the powerful theme of his life." (31). Comment.
13. Jack's memory of his first sight of Ruth in church is one which lasts for sixty-three years (34). He is overwhelmed by her womanly beauty (pp. 36, 48). What went wrong between them (see 39, 42, 60, 65).

14. Jack purchases the Farrier farm of less than 100 acres. It was a challenge to Jack (51).
Comment.
15. The tension between Jack and Will Wells, his hand, ultimately ends in a physical fight. It results in his loss of the Farrier place after three years of labor on it. Comment.
16. The episode over the flour is revealing (88–89). Comment.
17. Jack’s affair with Rose is not surprising. Is it morally offensive?
18. Andy Catlett’s going to college is something utterly alien to him. Andy “will step into a future that Old Jack does not know and that he cannot imagine.” Jack is aware of all the farewells and departures he has witnessed. Comment.
19. At age forty-eight Jack experiences a rebirth of sorts when he decides to restore the farm when he comes to terms with himself. Comment.
20. When he reaches the point when he can no longer work the farm, “he began to go into the past.” The remainder of his life consists of retrospection and introspection. Is this typical of all of us?
21. Aside from Old Jack, who is your favorite character in this novel, and why?
22. Can a young person read this novel with much pleasure—or, what would you hope such a reader might get out of it?
23. How does Barry avoid the abyss of nostalgia in this novel, if in fact he does?

The Stone Angel

In *The Stone Angel*, Hagar Shipley, age ninety, tells the story of her life, and in doing so tries to come to terms with how the very qualities which sustained her have deprived her of joy. Mingling past and present, she maintains pride in the face of senility, while recalling the life she led as a rebellious young bride, and later as a grieving mother. Laurence gives us in Hagar a woman who is funny, infuriating, and heartbreakingly poignant. It is Laurence's admirable achievement to strike, with an equally sure touch, the peculiar note and the universal; she gives us a portrait of a remarkable character and at the same time the picture of old age itself, with the pain, the weariness, the terror, the impotent angers and physical mishaps, the realization that others are waiting and wishing for the end.

Author Information

Margaret Laurence was born on July 18, 1926 in the prairie town of Neepawa, Manitoba. Born Jean Margaret Wemyss, Laurence suffered the loss of her parents at a very young age. Her mother, Verna Simpson Wemyss, died in 1930 when Margaret was only four years old; her father Robert Wemyss, who later married Verna's sister, passed away only five years after the death of his first wife. Raised from then on by her aunt/stepmother, a teacher and librarian, and her maternal grandfather, Laurence's love of literature and of writing flourished with her aunt's encouragement and guidance. In 1949, Margaret and her husband left for England and then, a year later, they moved to the British Protectorate of Somalia (known today as Somalia). They returned to Vancouver in 1957 with their two children, where Margaret finished *This Side of Jordan*. After separating from her husband in 1962, she moved with her two children to England, where she would reside for most of the next decade. It was at Elm Cottage that Laurence completed four of her five Manawaka books: *The Stone Angel* (1964), *A Jest of God* (1966), *The Fire-Dwellers* (1969), and *A Bird in the House* (1970). In 1966, *A Jest of God* won Laurence her first Governor General's Award for fiction and was soon adapted into a movie entitled "Rachel, Rachel." Margaret Laurence died on January 5, 1987 and her ashes were interred at the Riverside Cemetery in Neepawa, Manitoba.

Discussion Questions for The Stone Angel

1. What is the significance of the title, *The Stone Angel*? (The cemetery statue is mentioned three times—at the start of the novel, near the end when Hagar describes visiting with John when he had to muscle the statue back to a standing position, and at the end when Hagar recounts a last visit to the cemetery with Marvin and Doris.)
2. When Hagar is visiting Silverthreads, the old age care facility (against her will), she has a conversation with a Mrs. Steiner who lives there.
“Do you get used to life?” she says. “Can you answer me that? It all comes as a surprise. You get your first period, and you’re amazed—*I can have babies now—such a thing?* When the children come, you think—*Is it mine? Did it come out of me? Who could believe it?* When you can’t have them any more, what a shock—*It’s finished—so soon?*”
I peer at her, thinking how peculiar that she knows so much.
“You’re right. I never got used to a blessed thing.” (104)
How does she mean this? Discuss what things Hagar never got used to and what effect it has had on her life.
3. Hagar’s daughter-in-law Doris tries to care for her in many ways, and she invites the local minister, Mr. Troy, to visit. On page 120, Troy asks if Hagar believes in “God’s infinite mercy.”
I blurt a reply without thinking. “*What’s so merciful about Him, I’d like to know?*”
We regard each other from a vast distance, Mr. Troy and I.
“*What could possibly make you say that?*” he asks.
Pry and pry—what does he want of me? I’m tired out. I can’t fence with him.
“*I had a son,*” I say, “*and lost him.*”
“*You’re not alone,*” says Mr. Troy.
“*That’s where you’re wrong,*” I reply.
In what ways does Hagar feel along? What do her comments about God reveal about her beliefs?
4. Hagar has struggled all her life to be independent and “right, no matter the cost.” When her son John dies (she knows in her heart that she drove him to it), she closes up. When a well-meaning nurse tries to comfort Hagar, she responds with the old resolve.
She put a well-meaning arm around me. “*Cry. Let yourself. It’s the best thing.*”
But I shoved her arm away. I straightened my spine, and that was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my entire life, to stand straight then. I wouldn’t cry in front of strangers, whatever it cost me.
But when at last I was home, alone in Marvin’s old bedroom, and women from the town were sitting in the kitchen below and brewing coffee, I found my tears had been locked too long and wouldn’t come now at my bidding. The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all. When the ministering women handed me the cup of hot coffee, they murmured how well I was taking it, and I could only look at them dry-eyed from a great distance and not say a single word. All the night long, I had only one thought—I’d

had so many things to say to him, so many things to out to rights. He hadn't waited to hear. (242–243)

Comment on this passage.

5. While she is in the hospital, near the end of the book, Mr. Troy comes to visit. He is surprised that she asks him to sign a version of the doxology. He does, and she has this reaction.

“I would have wished it. This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that—simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known, in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances—oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth? Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains with me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh my two, my dead..Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years.” (292)

Discuss her revelation.

The Women of Brewster Place

Once the home of poor Irish and Italian immigrants, Brewster Place, a rotting tenement on a dead-end street, now shelters black families. This novel portrays the courage, the fear, and the anguish of some of the women there who hold their families together, trying to make a home. Among them are: Mattie Michael, the matriarch who loses her son to prison; Etta Mae Johnson who tries to trade the 'high life' for marriage with a local preacher; Kiswana Browne who leaves her middle-class family to organize a tenant's union.

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>

Tuesdays With Morrie

This true story about the love between spiritual mentor and his pupil has soared to the bestseller list for many reasons. For starters, it reminds us of the affection and gratitude that many of us still feel for the significant mentors of our past. It also plays out a fantasy many of us have entertained: what would it be like to look those people up again, tell them how much they meant to us, maybe even resume the mentorship? Plus, we meet Morrie Schwartz—a one-of-a-kind professor, whom the author describes as looking like a cross between a biblical prophet and Christmas elf. And finally, we are privy to intimate moments of Morrie's final days as he lies dying from a terminal illness. Even on his deathbed, this twinkling-eyed mensch manages to teach us all about living robustly and fully. It is an analysis of Morrie's life and the things he has learned about living and dying now that he is faced with the nearness of his own death. It is also a book about Mitch and his own journey, the lessons he learns still from his old teacher, friend, and mentor.

Author Information

Mitch Albom is the author of six previous books. A nationally syndicated columnist for the Detroit Free Press and a nationally syndicated radio host for ABC and WJR-AM, Albom has, for more than a decade, been named top sports columnist in the nation by the Sports Editors of America, the highest honor in the field. A panelist on ESPN's *Sports Reporters*, Albom also regularly serves as a commentator for that network. He serves on numerous charitable boards and has founded two charities in metropolitan Detroit: The Dream Fund, which helps underprivileged youth study the arts, and Time to Help, a monthly volunteer program. He lives with his wife, Janine, in Michigan.

Discussion Questions for Tuesdays With Morrie

1. Are we usually faced by a crisis of some sort before we feel inclined to reassess our life goals and values?
2. Thoreau said, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Does Morrie's illness confirm or deny this assumption?
3. As you read along, is it easier to identify with Morrie or with the narrator?
4. Do you agree with Morrie's statement (p. 42) that "the culture we have does not make people feel good about themselves." Is this a condemnation of our materialistically oriented culture?
5. "So many people walk around with a meaningless life." (p. 43) Thoreau said something similar: "I went to the woods because I wish to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." He also said, "Our life is frittered away by detail...simplify, simplify." Do you see Morrie in these statements?
6. "We're so wrapped up with egotistical things, career, family, having enough money...we're involved in millions of little acts just to keep going. So we don't get into the habit of standing back and looking at our lives and saying, is this all? Is this all I want? Is something missing?" (p. 65) Discuss.
7. Morrie frequently emphasizes the importance of love in our daily lives. (P. 130: "We Talk About How Love Goes On") Is this the capstone of his philosophy?
8. Morrie regards the plight of Job as a case of overkill—why? (p. 151)
9. Is our culture primarily predicated upon money? (p. 154)
10. Morrie advocates the importance of forgiveness in our lives (p. 164). Discuss.
11. Discuss Morrie's words: "When you learn how to die, you learn how to live."
12. Morrie faced his death honestly; sometimes he was confident and resigned, but at other times, he was afraid and resentful. Do you think that since he had time (the disease, ALS, took years to end his life) to think and work through it all that he was wiser than if he had suddenly died?
13. Morrie tells Mitch that it is never too late to forgive (164–168). Discuss Morrie's ideas here: 1) that forgiving *ourselves* is important; and 2) that forgiveness is healing (and not forgiving is painful).
14. In an interview with Koppel, Morrie refers to a letter he had received (71–72). He tells Koppel that he lost his mother when he was very young and that he was so lonely. "Morrie," Koppel said, "that was seventy years ago your mother died. The pain still goes on?" "You bet," Morrie whispered. (72) This points powerfully to how death feels like a taking away. Discuss these ideas.
15. Comment on Morrie's ideas that as long as we can love each other, and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live on—in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here...Death ends a life, not a relationship. (174)