**Discussion Questions**

The Growing Older, Growing Wiser theme has been developed with sets of specific discussion questions for each of the available reading selections. These questions have been provided to encourage a deeper discussion among participants and to provide general guidance and direction. Facilitators and participants are encouraged to research, prepare, and engage with additional questions for their specific needs.

**Balsamroot: A Memoir**

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**

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 doe 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**

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**

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 patriarchial stories with women’s stories, however mundane and unfinished. To what extent does Jackalope Dreams continue the work of the family memoirs, replacing a patriarchial 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 boo9k 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: 19 Stores of Youth and Identity**

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**

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, Growi8ng 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**

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.

1. 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. Tory 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?

1. 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.

1. 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 sing 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**

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?

**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)