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Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

The River Wife

by

Jonis Agee

(New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2007)

Author:

Jonis Agee is an award-winning author whose novels include the *New York Times* Notable Books *Sweet Eyes* and *Strange Angels*, and most recently, *The Weight of Dreams*. A native of Nebraska, Agee spent most of her childhood summers in Missouri near Lake of the Ozarks. She taught for many years at the College of Saint Catherine in St. Paul, Minnesota, and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. After a long absence, she returned to Nebraska, where she lives north of Omaha on an acreage along the Missouri River and teaches at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. [From the book jacket]

Summary:

In 1811, moments after a devastating earthquake, French fur trapper Jacques Ducharme rescues Annie Lark from the ruins of her family home on the shores of the Mississippi. While Jacques nurses her back to health, Annie learns to love the strong, brooding man and become his “River Wife.”

More than a century later, in 1930, Hedit Rails comes to Jacques’ Landing to marry Clement Ducharme, a direct descendant of the fur trapper and river pirate. When, night after late night, mysterious phone calls take Clement from their home, a pregnant Hedit finds comfort in a set of old leather-bound journals. But as she reads of Jacques’ disturbing history – his tragedy-stricken romance with Annie; his exploits with Omah, a freed slave who joins him as a river raider; his life with his second wife, Laura, and their daughter, Little Maddie, who inherits her father’s dream and passion for the land – Hedit fears that history is repeating itself with Jacques’ kin.

Through intertwined stories, Agee vividly portrays a lineage of love and heartbreak, passion and deceit, as each river wife comes to discover that blind devotion cannot keep the past from haunting the present.[From the book jacket]

Questions:

1. The house Jacques Ducharme builds for Annie Lark is present throughout the novel. What is its significance? Why are Annie and later her ghost always seen outside the house, never inside?

2. The New Madrid earthquake profoundly changed not only the physical character of the landscape but also the human characters of the region. How would you describe the effects on the people in the novel?
3. Who is the “river wife?” Are all the women in the novel wives? Why and how are they attracted to these men?
4. What is the meaning of the circumstances of Jacques’ death?
5. Why does Omah join Jacques as a pirate, and why does she stay with the family later? How is Omah like and unlike the other women?
6. Why does old Maddie stay to take care of Jacques and Laura’s baby? Doesn’t she realize that Jacques has been instrumental in the deaths of her two children?
7. Jacques Ducharme is a powerful figure throughout the novel – even in death. What is the source of his power? What did Annie Lark and Little Maddie find to love in him?
8. Does Annie really envision having an affair with Audubon? What are his intentions?
9. Why isn’t Laura satisfied with her marriage and prospect of wealth with Jacques? What is driving her to align herself with Major Stark? Does she get what she deserves?
10. Why does L. O. Swam give up his dream of returning home to stay with Little Maddie? Is it fair that Little Maddie asks this of him?
11. How is each of the characters both similar to Jacques and different from him?
12. *The River Wife* grapples with the secrets that plague families through generations, growing more hidden and deadly as they undermine the house. Would it have been possible to change this legacy? What would become of Hedio then?
13. Although their lives are filled with loss, what do the women and men of this novel gain through their marriages and relationships? What makes them continue to struggle with each other, with the land, with the ghosts that haunt their lives

Further Reading:

East Side Story. Louis Auchincloss. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.

Keeping the House. Ellen Baker. New York: Random House, 2007.

Guernica. Dave Boling. New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2008.

The Vanishing Moon. Joseph Coulson. New York: Archipelago Books, 2004.

Golden Country. Jennifer Gilmore. New York. Scribner, 2006.