



Discussion Questions

Discussion Questions for *Mimosa Lane*

Synopsis

Mimosa Lane, a destroyed Georgian plantation, lives only in memory for young Rachel. Three generations of family misfortunes leave the girl in poverty on the hard-luck streets of Tulsa. When Rachel encounters an old, black woman, once enslaved by her grandmother, life teeters on the brink of despair.

Forced by her stepfather to marry a crusty, old, backwoods moon-shiner, Rachel escapes a rundown cabin in the isolated hills, but finds escaping her past more challenging. Finding refuge at a seemingly peaceful farm, she meets three brothers—each with the potential to provide Rachel happiness she thought lost.

The conflicts of her past lead Rachel into the real-life drama of the Tulsa race riots of 1921. Set against the backdrop of Tulsa's rise from a rowdy town in Indian Territory to the sophisticated "Oil Capital of the World", Rachel learns life-changing influences come from unlikely places, and discovers tomorrow is rooted in today.

Discussion Questions

1. What main themes emerge in *Mimosa Lane*?
2. What perspective does the author use in *Mimosa Lane* and why do you think he chose this voice?
3. What is the significance of the title, *Mimosa Lane*, to the story?
4. Part 2 of the novel is titled *Three Rivers*. Three Rivers is the name of the farm Rachel finds in the winter night. What is the symbolism of the name Three Rivers?
5. On Page 165, Rachel and Mrs. Livingston have a dialogue about the mimosa trees in Mrs. Livingston's garden. Why is Mrs. Livingston going to remove the trees and what is the insinuation?
6. On page 117, Bonnie Allen is introduced as a character. What is Bonnie's role in the story and what are the dynamics of the relationship between Bonnie and Rachel?
7. *Mimosa Lane* is divided into five parts and each section is a story unto itself. What changes in tone do you see in each section?

8. There are several historical events happening in *Mimosa Lane*. Can you name some?
9. Rachel, Laura McMurry, and Aunt Raddy share a common experience, what was it?
10. The first time Carl and Rachel have a meaningful conversation, Carl loans her some books. What were the titles and what relationship do these authors have to the story?
11. Roy Hopper is the obvious villain in the story. What were your feelings about this character and how did they change through the story?
12. Late in the story, Rachel has an encounter with Charles “Pretty Boy” Floyd at Three Rivers, which confirms Taft McMurry’s role as a self-centered scoundrel. At this meeting Rachel meets a girl named Candice. What was the significance of Candice arriving at Three Rivers?

Discussion Questions

The Broken Statue

Author Responses in italics

1. What main themes emerge in *The Broken Statue*?
Tomorrow is rooted in today became the main theme. The story attempts to show the fragile hold some families have on economic and social status. The main character, Rachel, is put in a desperate position based on circumstances and choices made generations earlier. The decisions made by Rachel's mother put Rachel in a position of risk as it relates to finding respectability.
2. What perspective does the author use in *Mimosa Lane* and why do you think he chose this voice?
The story is told from the third-person limited perspective. The narrator is an unknown outsider who reports only what he or she sees and hears. The narrator tells us what is happening, but only occasionally tells us what the main character is thinking or feeling.
3. What is the significance of the title, *Mimosa Lane*, to the story?
*When I was a boy it seemed every yard in my hometown had a mimosa tree in the backyard. I wanted to write a story from a more feminine perspective. Almost of the main character in the story are female. I was looking for some symbol to tie the story together and decided on the mimosa trees from my youth. The trees are decorated with a delicate, pink flower in the summer time and always seemed dainty to me. The trees are also very flexible and resilient. Women from Oklahoma during this time period often demonstrated this delicate toughness. Calling the plantation from Georgia, *Mimosa Lane*, let me tight in the refugee status of Rachel and her mother from the pampered life of the Old South, which they never knew. Using a plantation called *Mimosa Lane*, located in Georgia also emphasized that many refugees from that part of the country migrated to the new lands in Oklahoma.*
4. Part 2 of the novel is title *Three Rivers*. *Three Rivers* is the name of the farm Rachel finds in the winter night. What is the symbolism of the name *Three Rivers*?
*The farm is fictionally named *Three Rivers* because it is close to the convergence of the Verdigris, Arkansas, and Grand Rivers. Eventually Rachel reunites with Aunt Raddy at *Three Rivers* and lives with her mother-in-law Laura McMurry at the farm. The three women come from three different backgrounds: Rachel is a white refugee from a ruined plantation, Aunt Raddy is a former slave, and Laura McMurry is part Cherokee Indian. All three women had roots in Georgia but came together at the farm representing three cultures in Oklahoma coming together. The new state had many southerners in its population, had the most Native Americans located within its borders, and Oklahoma had the most historically black communities. This symbolism is explicitly stated on page 303.*

5. On Page 165, Rachel and Mrs. Livingston have a dialogue about the mimosa trees in Mrs. Livingston's garden. Why is Mrs. Livingston going to remove the trees and what is the insinuation?

Rachel is admiring the row of mimosa trees in Mrs. Livingston's garden and trying to make polite conversation when Mrs. Livingston says, "...they are a messy tree and quite insidious...they attempt to take over the whole yard and are difficult for the help to keep trimmed." Mrs. Livingston is making a thinly veiled reference to Rachel being a type of weed and unsuitable to be a part of the Livingston family.

6. On page 117, Bonnie Allen is introduced as a character. What is Bonnie's role in the story and what are the dynamics of the relationship between Bonnie and Rachel?

Bonnie Allen was introduced to add an antagonist for the main character Rachel during her stay at Three Rivers. Bonnie is an attractive girl who becomes the chief rival for the attention of Taft McMurry. Bonnie and Rachel are classic rivals early in the story and Bonnie does several things to make the reader not like her. Later in the story, Rachel and Bonnie are forced to work together to make ends meet on the farm. Eventually, Rachel discovers a secret Bonnie has hidden that give the two young women something to share. Although Bonnie is never a main character, I liked the way the friendship slowly evolves to where the two women are the best of friends by the end of the story. I think it emphasized that first impressions can sometimes be misleading and that it often takes time for people's true characters to be revealed.

7. Mimosa Lane is divided into five parts and each section is a story unto itself. What changes in tone do you see in each section?

Part 1: The Cabin. The first part of the story shows the desperation a young Rachel faced. With scant family support and few social mechanisms in place, the book shows the fragile existence many children faced in that era. Choices effect people's destination in life, but circumstances and decisions by two preceding generation put Rachel in the desperate situation in which she finds herself.

Part 2: Three Rivers. Escaping her past poverty in Tulsa and her imprisonment in the lonely cabin, Rachel begins to see some rays of hope for her future although her past still haunts her.

Part 3: The Darkness. The hope of Three Rivers evaporates as Rachel faces real challenges of adulthood. The this section, Rachel is less threaten by her past as she is by the emotional scars the past and left on her.

Part 4: The Riots. This section is more action packed than other section. Rachel's unique and taboo relationship with a black family living in the prosperous area of Greenwood allows her to witness the Tulsa Race Riots up-close and personal. As a writer, I wanted to show the extent, drama, and terror of the Tulsa Race Riots without making any editorial comment. By allowing the reader to see the events

through the eyes of the character, I feel the reader may have a stronger emotional tie to the tragedy than if I had tried to tell them what happened.

Part 5: The Legacy. Rachel is a strong female character that endures many challenges and even hardships. The section of the story involves Rachel last great challenge, The Great Depression. Even without the depression and the accompanying drought, life on the farm was hard. This section attempts to show the kind of grit and determination it would take to survive this catastrophe. In the end, Rachel is able to stop the downward economic spiral that put her in such meager surroundings and starts the upward spiral of generational success. This story makes reference to five generations trace through the matriarchs of the family. The reader learns how circumstances and choices for Rachel's grandmother and mother impacted the character and in the end we see Rachel's daughter and granddaughter succeeding. In the last chapter, Rachel enjoys her granddaughters and is able to share their hope for a better future. The granddaughters going to college and having a prospect of a better life becomes Rachel's legacy.

8. There are several historical events happening in *Mimosa Lane*. Can you name some?

I will probably forget some, but there are several that were noteworthy to me. The first obvious event happens in the first few chapters and it involves the long-term impact the American Civil War had on Rachel's grandmother and mother. Oklahoma achieving statehood in November 1907 is another historical happening that impacts the story. Oklahoma quickly became a "dry-state" prohibiting the sale of liquor. The oil strike in Glenpool radically changed Tulsa forever. Prior to the discovery of oil, Tulsa a small somewhat rowdy town. In a couple of decades, Tulsa would become the Oil Capital of the World and become one of the nation's fastest growing cities. World War I figures heavily into the plot with one of the main characters going to the war. The limited availability of careers for women and blacks is another historical fact. In the story, Rachel takes a job as an operator. This was a challenging occupation and one of the few jobs available to women. The race riots occurred over a two-day period during Memorial Day in Tulsa. The riots destroyed 35 square blocks of the African-American neighborhood of Greenwood. The cameo appearance of Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd in the story is based on historical information. The bank robber shot a policeman in Tulsa and often hid in the hills close to Three Rivers. The funeral for Pretty Boy Floyd attracted between 20,000 to 40,000 people and is still considered the largest funeral in the state's history.

9. Rachel, Laura McMurry, and Aunt Raddy share a common experience, what was it?

All three women endured losing a child. Infant mortality was a terrifying fact of life for families of this era. A young woman I know lost a child while I was writing this part of the story and I tried to convey some of the sadness of that event. After writing the manuscript, I had many women share their stories about losing a child. I hope I handle the subject in an appropriate way.

10. The first time Carl and Rachel have a meaningful conversation, Carl loans her some books. What were the titles and what relationship do these authors have to the story?

James Allen's "As a Man Thinketh," Charles Dickens, "Great Expectations," and Victor Hugo's "Les Misérables" are the three books Carl gives to Rachel. James Allen has always been one of my favorite writers and his insights into the responsibilities we have for the choices we make—even in our attitudes—is timeless. As in "Great Expectations," the main character Rachel finds that things are not always as they seem and sometimes the people that will most impact your future are sometimes not the people your think will help you. Another of my favorite stories of all times is Victor Hugo's "Les Miserable" which pits the idea of religion versus righteousness. Later in the story, Carl and Rachel will discuss this story. Carl ask who her protector is and Rachel answers, your mother, Laura.

11. Roy Hopper is the obvious villain in the story. What were your feelings about this character and how did they change through the story?

My wife tells me that I am good at writing characters that have flaws and that I am particularly good at writing despicable, villainous characters. Roy Hopper definitely fit the bill as being a contemptible character who single handedly tries to ruin Rachel's life. As I started rewriting the manuscript I asked myself if such a vile character was realistic and I decided to give Roy some redeeming qualities. Although Roy Hopper is immoral and greedy through most of the story, I thought it would be more interesting to have him do some actions and have some dialogue that showed that anyone could change for the better. I don't think readers will like Roy any better, but I think it was an interesting concept to have him play the hero through some of the action and come to a degree of repentance. In contrast to Roy, who is very unlikable, I tried to introduce two very likable characters, Taft McMurry and Charles Livingston, which had the serious character flaw of selfishness. I questioned myself if greed were perhaps a more tolerable character flaw than selfishness.

12. Late in the story, Rachel has an encounter with Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd at Three Rivers, which confirms Taft McMurry's role as a self-centered scoundrel. At this meeting Rachel meets a girl named Candice. What was the significance of Candice arriving at Three Rivers?

Laura McMurry challenges Rachel to have a talk with Candice, who is an under aged runaway girl. "Mimosa Lane" is very much a story about strong female character, but more importantly a story about how each generation impacts the next. The theme, "Tomorrow is rooted in today," is found through the story. In the chapter, Rachel takes the responsibility of mentoring Candice. Not until Candice is gone, does Rachel understand that Laura had done the same thing for her years earlier. In essence, Rachel becomes like her two mentors, Aunt Raddy and Laura McMurry. The idea of adding Candice was an afterthought for me during the writing process, but I thought it emphasized the idea that we can have profound, positive influences on others.

Trivia about *Mimosa Lane*

- On page 6, the narrator references the “War Between the State” which shows the stories southern perspective. Most be that did not live in the south refer to the war as The Civil War.
- Chapters 2 and 3 were heavily influenced by Margaret Mitchell’s epic *Gone with the Wind*. At one time I thought of make Beatrice a relative of Scarlet O’Hara since the two characters were in Atlanta close to the same time, but decided it best to leave an American classic alone.
- The story of Agnes’s isolation in the cabin and the belief that her father was bringing food was very personal for me. Growing up, I had a great-grandmother who was to me the most frightening and irritable woman I had known. I was talking to my mother one day about how cranky Great Grandma Nance could be and my mother related the story that Great Grandma Nance married a divorced man in southwest Missouri and was denounced by her mother, a staunch Baptist that did not believe in divorce. According to family lore, my great grandmother and my grandmother survived the winter when her father would sneak food to the family. One of the things I like about this era of history is that the social morals were so black and white, which makes for may interesting conflicts and challenges.
- The first preacher in Tulsa was a Presbyterian minister Reverend William Penn Hayworth. He lasted only three years. The day after a fiery sermon on the evils of alcohol, he was mugged and left for dead. He resigned the next day and moved to California.
- The neighborhood in which Rachel grew up in Tulsa was real, but no longer exists. It would be located under a cross-town expressway now. Likewise, the farm of Three Rivers could have existed, but if such a place was real, it would now be located under the Fort Gibson Reservoir.
- Oklahoma has more “Historically Black Towns” than any other state. Many African Americans came for opportunities in a southern state that was not completely southern and other came with the Native American population that was force to Oklahoma. The Greenwood community existed in north Tulsa and was called America’s Black Wall Street. One reason the community was so prosperous is the fact that African Americans were not encouraged or even allowed to shop in the “white” part of town.
- Fort Gibson was established in 1824 about a decade before the Cherokee Trail of Tears occurred and is one of the oldest settlements in Oklahoma. Washington Irving departed from Fort Gibson in 1835 on an expedition that resulted in his writings *A Tour on the Prairies*.

- The Tulsa Race Riots began on May 31, 1921 and continued for two days. The incident was sparked when a black man named Dick Rowland, stepped into an elevator in the Drexel Building operated by a woman named Sarah Page. The young woman screamed and Rowland ran away. Rowland was later arrested and was being held at the city jail when a large crowd gathered. A group of armed black men arrived to offer assistance to the sheriff. Events escalated until the worst riot since the American Civil War ensued. In a twist of irony, Dick Rowland was never charged of any crime. The riots destroyed 35 blocks of the north Tulsa and caused many deaths. For more information, you can read The Tulsa Race Riot Commission's report filed in 1997.

- In Chapter 78, Rachel encounters a group of outlaws hiding out near Three Rivers. Rachel recognizes Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd. He did not like the nickname Pretty Boy and preferred the nickname "Choc." Floyd killed a policeman in Tulsa about the time of this fictional event so it would have been possible for him to have been hiding in the hills, but historically, Floyd was wounded in the gunfight and would probably have not been as hospitable to Rachel as the fictional character was. Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd was killed in Ohio a few years later. His funeral in nearby Sallisaw drew 20,000 to 40,000 people and is considered perhaps the largest funeral ever held in the state of Oklahoma.