

# Southfield Public Library

---

## *Orphan Train* by Christina Baker Kline

*Discussion questions used at SPL March 8 & 14, 2017*

"I've come to think that's what heaven is – a place in the memory of others where our best selves live on." states Vivian in the prologue. What do you think about her reflection on heaven?

Is the story plausible? Would Molly have been given 50 hours of community service for stealing a book from the Library? Was the story predictable?

Would you classify this book as Historical Fiction? Why or why not? How much would say is factual?

Towards the end of the book, Vivian reflects about her life until that point "My entire life has felt like chance. Random moments of loss and connection. This is the first one that feels, instead, like fate," she states after Dutchy falls asleep. How truthful/real is this for us as readers? Do you believe in destiny? What is fate?

What do you think about Vivian's decision to give her daughter away? Do you think should have changed her mind if she had of waited?

Molly is assigned a class project of portaging, which is an Native American tradition of carrying the boat plus some belongs (its cargo) between two navigable bodies of water. What things would you bring with you?

### **Discussion Questions taken from the Reading Group Guide:**

1. On the surface, Vivian's and Molly's lives couldn't be more different. In what ways are their stories similar?

2. In the prologue Vivian mentions that her "true love" died when she was 23, but she doesn't mention the other big secret in the book. Why not?

3. Why hasn't Vivian ever shared her story with anyone? Why does she tell it now?

4. What role does Vivian's grandmother play in her life? How does the reader's perception of her shift as the story unfolds?

5. Why does Vivian seem unable to get rid of the boxes in her attic?

6. In *Women of the Dawn*, a nonfiction book about the lives of four Wabanaki Indians excerpted in the epigraph, Bunny McBride writes:

*In portaging from one river to another, Wabanakis had to carry their canoes and all other possessions. Everyone knew the value of traveling light and understood that it required leaving some things behind. Nothing encumbered movement more than fear, which was often the most difficult burden to surrender.*

How does the concept of portaging reverberate throughout this novel? What fears hamper Vivian's progress? Molly's?

7. Vivian's name changes several times over the course of the novel: from Niamh Power to Dorothy Nielsen to Vivian Daly. How are these changes significant for her? How does each name represent a different phase of her life?

8. What significance, if any, does Molly Ayer's name have?

9. How did Vivian's first-person account of her youth and the present-day story from Molly's third-person-limited perspective work together? Did you prefer one story to the other? Did the juxtaposition reveal things that might not have emerged in a traditional narrative?

10. In what ways, large and small, does Molly have an impact on Vivian's life? How does Vivian have an impact on Molly's?

11. What does Vivian mean when she says, "I believe in ghosts"?

12. When Vivian finally shares the truth about the birth of her daughter and her decision to put May up for adoption she tells Molly that she was "selfish" and "afraid." Molly defends her and affirms Vivian's choice. How did you perceive Vivian's decision? Were you surprised she sent her child to be adopted after her own experiences with the Children's Aid Society?

13. When the children are presented to audiences of potential caretakers, the Children's Aid Society explains adoptive families are responsible for the child's religious upbringing. What role does religion play in this novel? How do Molly and Vivian each view God?

14. When Vivian and Dutchy are reunited she remarks, "However hard I try, I will always feel alien and strange. And now I've stumbled on a fellow outsider, one who speaks my language without saying a word." How is this also true for her friendship with Molly?

15. When Vivian goes to live with the Byrnes Fanny offers her food and advises, "You got to learn to take what people are willing to give." In what ways is this good advice for Vivian and Molly? What are some instances when their independence helped them?

16. Molly is enthusiastic about Vivian's reunion with her daughter, but makes no further efforts to see her own mother. Why is she unwilling or unable to effect a reunion in her own family? Do you think she will someday?

17. Vivian's Claddagh cross is mentioned often throughout the story. What is its significance? How does its meaning change or deepen over the course of Vivian's life? (*Questions issued by publisher.*)

# Southfield Public Library

---

## *General discussion questions*

- For the person who chose the book – What made you want to read it? What made you pick it for the book club? Did it live up to your expectations?
- How is the book structured? First person? Third person? Flashbacks? Narrative devices? Do you think the author did a good job with it?
- How would you describe the author's writing style? Concise? Flowery? How is language used in this book? Read aloud a passage that really struck you. How does that passage relate to the book as a whole?
- How effective is the author's use of plot twists? Were you able to predict certain things before they happened? Did the author keep you guessing until the end?
- Did the book hold your interest?
- How important is the setting to the story? Did you feel like you were somewhere else? Did the time setting make a difference in the story? Did the author provide enough background information for you to understand the setting and time placement?
- Which is stronger in the book – the characters or the plots?
- Would you recommend this book to someone else? Why? And to whom?



# Southfield Public Library

---

*Title:*

*Discussion questions taken from a website:*

*website address:*

Molly Molasses -

<http://maineanencyclopedia.com/molly-molasses/>

Children's Aid Society 1854-1930s

<http://orphantraindepot.org/history/the-childrens-aid-society/>

Example of paperwork for the children:

*Terms on Which Boys are Placed in Homes*

*Applications must be endorsed by the Local Committee.*

Boys under 15 years of age, if not legally adopted, must be retained as members of the family and sent to school according to the Educational Laws of the State, until they are 18 years old. Suitable provision must then be made for their future.

Boys between 15 years of age must be retained as members of the family and sent to school during the winter months until they are 17 years old, when a mutual arrangement may be made.

Boys over 16 years of age must be retained as members of the family for one year, after which a mutual arrangement may be made.

Parties taking boys agree to write to the Society at least once a year, or to have the boys do so.

Removals of boys proving unsatisfactory can be arranged through the Local Committee or an Agent of the Society, the party agreeing to retain the boy a reasonable length of time after notifying the Society of the desired change.

Orphan Train History

<http://orphantraindepot.org/history/>

From 1854 to 1929 an estimated 250,000 orphaned, abandoned, and homeless children were placed throughout the United States and Canada during the Orphan Train Movement.

When the orphan train movement began, it was estimated that 30,000 abandoned children were living on the streets of New York City.



Charles Loring Brace founded the [Children's Aid Society](#) in order to help these children.

The aid institutions developed a program that placed homeless children into homes throughout the country. The children were transported to their new homes on trains which were eventually labeled "orphan trains."

This period of mass relocation of children in the United States is widely recognized as the beginning of documented foster care in America.





The trains, and their destinations, were a mystery to the orphans on board.

Advertisement from the Orphanages soliciting the children to the towns people:

**Homes Wanted**  
*FOR CHILDREN.*

---

A Company of Orphan Children of different ages  
will arrive at

**Oakland, Iowa,**  
**Friday, Dec. 9, '04.**

The Distribution will take place at the  
Opera House at 10:30 a.m. and 1:30 p.m.

---

The object of the coming of these children is to find homes in your midst, especially among farmers, where they may enjoy a happy and wholesome family life, where kind care, good example and moral training will fit them for a life of self-support and usefulness. They come under the auspices of the New York Children's Aid Society, by whom they have been tested and found to be well-meaning and willing boys and girls.

The conditions are that these children shall be properly clothed, treated as members of the family, given proper school advantages and remain in the family until they are sixteen years of age. At the expiration of the time specified it is hoped that arrangements can be made whereby they may be able to remain in the family indefinitely. The Society retains the right to remove a child at any time for just cause and agrees to remove any found unsatisfactory after being notified.

Applications may be made to any one of the following well known citizens, who have agreed to act as local committees to aid the agent in securing homes.

Committee: *S. S. Rust, E. M. Smart, A. C. Vieth, E. C. Read,  
W. B. Estler, Dr. R. G. Smith, N. W. Wentz.*

---

Remember the time and place. All are invited.  
Come out and hear the address.

---

Office: 105 East 22d St., New York City.

---

**H. D. CLARK, Iowa Agent,**  
Dodge Center, Minn.