

Discussion Questions for

***The Promise* by Ann Weisgarber**

What might be the reasons Bernadette forced Nan to make the promise? Did Oscar encourage Nan to make the promise because he wanted Nan to do it or because he wanted Bernadette to stop worrying about it? How valid is a coerced promise made to a dying person?

What does Catherine want out of life? Why did she start a relationship with Edward and what did she get out of that relationship that makes it so important to her? Catherine calls her relationship with Edward a “friendship.” Did the relationship ever become physical, and can you find evidence in the text to support your answer? Why does she hang on to the earrings for so long? What do they symbolize to her?

Because Catherine’s father left his money to her instead of her mother, Catherine’s mother had to marry a second time. How does this affect their relationship? Does her mother still love her? Should her mother be kinder to Catherine?

What someone wears and how they wear it says so much during this time. What does it say about Oscar that he always appears uncomfortable in fine clothing? What does it say about Catherine that she refuses to stop wearing fine clothing in the heat?

What are the differences between Catherine’s and Oscar’s religious beliefs? Do the differences in their denominations matter in the story? Do their religions affect their outlook or influence their behavior?

Why does Catherine deny playing the piano at the hotel (on page 49)? What does she associate playing with? What makes it so difficult for her to play in Galveston?

Oscar says he married Catherine because he wanted Andre to have access to culture. Is this the whole truth? What might be other reasons he wanted to marry Catherine?

Nan believes she is cursed when it comes to men. If she didn't believe that, might her relationship with Oscar have been different? Do you think Oscar would have married Nan eventually had Catherine not written him? Would Nan have made a good wife for Oscar?

What role does music play in Catherine's life? What role does music play for the people of Galveston? Both Catherine and Nan can play an instrument; however, Nan doesn't believe in playing for money, and they play very different kinds of music. Do they share any similarities in how they use music or why they play?

How did Catherine change over the course of the novel? How much of that change was due to Oscar and how much was due to Andre?

Will Nan keep Andre? Why should she give the boy to Oscar's relatives and why should she keep the boy herself? Why does the story leave the question of what will happen to Andre unanswered?

How would the story be different if there was only one point-of-view? If you had to choose, who would be the main character, Catherine or Nan? Why? Chapters from Nan's point-of-view start and end the book. Does that affect your decision?

Bernadette's mother was a prostitute. What might force a woman become a prostitute in this time period? What are options for unmarried women during this time?

Was there love between Catherine and Oscar? What was their relationship based on? Was there time for anything deeper?

Should Oscar have stayed and taken care of his family? Why does he leave?

In what ways does the author bring the era to life? What details did she use that create vivid images of Galveston and the island for you? How does she make the hurricane feel real for the reader?

Questions on Specific Quotes

"She said that like wounds could heal. Wounds stayed wounds. A person just got so they knew that; they just got to where they put one foot in front of the other. But I figured Mrs. Williams didn't know much about sorrow." (Chapter 8, page 137)

When Nan thinks this, what kind of sorrows is she thinking about? What does this thought say about her as a character? Is she correct that Catherine doesn't know much about sorrow?

“He was testing me, I understood. I could walk into the water and become part of this place. Or I could stay behind and the silence between us would only deepen.” (Chapter 10, page 180)

How is Oscar’s test both literal and figurative? In what other ways has Oscar tested Catherine? Why does Oscar use getting into the water as a test? Do you see any changes in Catherine after this?

“He found pleasure in the stars and admired the grace of pelicans. He was without pretense and this, I realized, was what drew me to him.” (Chapter 11, page 191)

Why does Catherine like Oscar’s lack of pretense? Does Catherine ever shed her own pretense?

“Fiction can never be superior to truth; the latter is a source of inspiration to us, richer and more fruitful than the former.” (Chapter 11, page 191)

This is an underlined passage in the book Catherine found in Oscar’s house. Do you think that Oscar or Bernadette underlined it? If it was Oscar, why do you think Oscar wanted to marry Catherine even though he knew she was not being truthful? Why would Oscar be willing to forgive that trait in Catherine?

Questions provided by Wendy Wilkinson and Houston Great Books.

Find a discussion group at www.houstongreatbooks.net.