

The Stills

Jess Montgomery

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Jess Montgomery opens *The Stills* with Zebediah, rather than with Lily or Fiona, the dual narrators for the rest of the novel. How does spending time with Zebediah—before Lily learns of his illness—affect your reaction to this news? What does this device add to the story?
2. Is there a significance to this story opening on Thanksgiving Day? How does this time of the year—ostensibly a time of celebration spent with family—relate to the murder that occurs that night and the events that follow?
3. Prohibition is in full swing at the time *The Stills* is set—and the Volstead Act is in fact a major thread through the novel. In chapter 5, Lily remembers a quote from Wayne Wheeler: *The government is under no obligation to furnish the people with alcohol that is drinkable when the Constitution prohibits it.* How might a position such as this be relevant in today’s landscape? Does your knowledge of Zebediah’s poisoning and George Vogel’s plan change your opinion of this quote?
4. In chapter 8, Fiona thinks, “She only wants to look forward, to a future in which she is in control of her and her children’s fates.” In some ways, this single-mindedness is admirable. Do you think, in Fiona’s specific case, the end justified the means?
5. The ideas of both punishment and vengeance are explored at length in *The Stills*. What do you see as the meaning of these two words? Which characters fall into each camp?
6. How do Lily’s own relationship with the Volstead Act and her duty to uphold the law shift from beginning to end of *The Stills*? In what way do Marvena’s, Zeb’s, and George Vogel’s choices impact her own in regard to Prohibition?
7. Alcohol and medicine were intricately tied together at this time. How does Dr. Goshen’s involvement in the story heighten that connection? Do you think doctors at the time of Prohibition often acted as Dr. Goshen did, or in similar ways?
8. Fiona and Lily are very different women whose lives—like those of so many women at the time—have been forever altered by marriage. How did these two men change our protagonists? Do you think Fiona and Lily reached the current places in their lives in spite of, or because of, their spouses? Their friendship? Are there instances where it aids them?
9. In chapter 32, Elias says to Lily, “Forgive me.” Knowing Elias’s past choices, do you think Elias truly expects or hopes for forgiveness from Lily at this point? Do you think Lily does forgive him?
10. In the final pages, Fiona thinks back on something Aunt Nell told her in chapter 2: “Careful, lest by hating you become what—or whom—you most hate.” How has this phrase become true for Fiona? Could she have avoided this fate? How might this warning be relevant to other characters in *The Stills*?

