



# **Orphan Train: A Novel (2013)**

by Christina Baker Kline

## **Discussion Questions (taken from Lit Lovers)**

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.)*

### **Summary**

Between 1854 and 1929, so-called orphan trains ran regularly from the cities of the East Coast to the farmlands of the Midwest, carrying thousands of abandoned children whose fates would be determined by pure luck. Would

they be adopted by a kind and loving family, or would they face a childhood and adolescence of hard labor and servitude?

As a young Irish immigrant, Vivian Daly was one such child, sent by rail from New York City to an uncertain future a world away. Returning east later in life, Vivian leads a quiet, peaceful existence on the coast of Maine, the memories of her upbringing rendered a hazy blur. But in her attic, hidden in trunks, are vestiges of a turbulent past.

Seventeen-year-old Molly Ayer knows that a community-service position helping an elderly widow clean out her attic is the only thing keeping her out of juvenile hall. But as Molly helps Vivian sort through her keepsakes and possessions, she discovers that she and Vivian aren't as different as they appear. A Penobscot Indian who has spent her youth in and out of foster homes, Molly is also an outsider being raised by strangers, and she, too, has unanswered questions about the past.

Moving between contemporary Maine and Depression-era Minnesota, *Orphan Train* is a powerful tale of upheaval and resilience, second chances, and unexpected friendship. *(From the publisher.)*

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### **Author Bio**

- Birth—1964
- Raised—in Maine and Tennessee, USA, and the UK
- Education—B.A., Yale University; M.B., Cambridge University; M.F.A., University of Virginia
- Currently—lives in Montclair, New Jersey

Christina Baker Kline is a novelist, nonfiction writer, and editor. In addition to *Orphan Train*, her novels include *Bird in Hand*, *The Way Life Should Be*, *Desire Lines*, and *Sweet Water*.

Kline also commissioned and edited two widely praised collections of original essays on the first year of parenthood and raising young children, *Child of Mine* and *Room to Grow*. She co-authored a book on feminist mothers and daughters, *The Conversation Begins*, with her mother, Christina L. Baker, and she coedited *About Face: Women Write About What They See When They Look in the Mirror* with Anne Burt.

Kline grew up in Maine, England, and Tennessee, and has spent a lot of time in Minnesota and North Dakota, where her husband grew up. She is a graduate

of Yale, Cambridge, and the University of Virginia, where she was a Hoyns Fellow in Fiction Writing. She has taught creative writing and literature at Fordham and Yale, among other places, and is a recent recipient of a Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation fellowship. She lives in Montclair, New Jersey, with her family. (From the publisher.)

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### **Book Reviews**

This superbly composed novel tells two parallel stories of suffering and perseverance, capturing the heart and mind equally and remaining mesmerizing through the intensely heart-wrenching conclusion.

#### ***RT Times Review***

Kline's absorbing new novel (after *Bird in the Hand*) is a heartfelt page-turner.... Seventeen-year-old Penobscot Indian Molly Ayer has spent most of her life in foster care. When...she ends up cleaning out elderly Vivian Daly's attic[,] Molly learns that Vivian was herself an orphan...put on the Orphan Train in the late 1920s and tossed from home to home in Minnesota. The growing connection leads Molly to dig deeper into Vivian's life, which allows Molly to discover her own potential and helps Vivian rediscover someone she believed had been lost to her forever.... Kline lets us live the characters' experiences vividly through their skin, and...[t]he growth from instinct to conscious understanding to partnership between the two is the foundation for a moving tale.

#### ***Publishers Weekly***

[A] compelling story about loss, adaptability, and courage. Molly is a rebellious 17-year-old foster child sentenced to community service for stealing a copy of *Jane Eyre*. She finds a position cleaning out the attic of Vivian, an elderly woman in their coastal Maine town. As Molly sorts through old trunks and boxes, Vivian begins to share stories from her past.... [when] she was packed off on one of the many orphan trains intended to bring children to Midwestern families who would care for them. Each orphan's lot was largely dependent on the luck of the draw. In this, Vivian's life parallels Molly's, and an unlikely friendship blossoms. —Christine Perkins, *Bellingham P.L., WA*

#### ***Library Journal***

[A] dramatic, emotional story from a neglected corner of American history. Molly is a troubled teen, a foster child bounced from one unsuitable home to another. Vivian is a wealthy 91-year-old widow, settled in a Victorian mansion on the Maine seashore. But Vivian's story has much in common with Molly's....

Vivian's journey west was aboard an "Orphan Train," a bit of misguided 1900s-era social engineering moving homeless, destitute city children, mostly immigrants, into Midwest families.... Kline does a superb job in connecting goth-girl Molly...to Vivian, who sees her troubled childhood reflected in angry Molly.... A deeply emotional story drawn from the shadows.

**Kirkus Reviews**

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