



Orphan Train (2013)

By Christina Baker Kline



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Discussion questions taken from *LitLovers*

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"?

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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.*)

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 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 Hoynes 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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