

Still Life Discussion Questions

by Louise Penny

Author Bio: (from Fantastic Fiction & Louise Penny's website)

Louise Penny is the author of the #1 New York Times Chief Inspector Armand Gamache novels. Before being published, Penny was a journalist. She was published for the first time in her 40's. Louise lives in a small village south of Montréal.



Penny has won numerous awards, including a CWA Dagger and the Agatha Award (six times), and was a finalist for the Edgar Award for Best Novel. In 2017, she received the Order of Canada for her contributions to Canadian culture.

Characters:

- **Three Pines** – Small town near Montreal. Little crime.
- **Surete du Quebec** – Provincial police force. Covers highways and rural areas. The 4th largest police force in Canada.
- **Chief Inspector Armand Gamache** – Member of the Surete du Quebec, the Quebec police. Head of Homicide. Lives in Montreal. Married 32 years. Wife Reine-Marie
- **Clara Morrow** – Jane's friend. Lives next door to Jane. Her husband is Peter. Both Clara and Peter are artists. Peter is successful, Clara less so. Clara is messy and disorganized.
- **Jane Neal** - 76 years - Murder victim. Never married. Former school teacher. Secret artist. Doesn't allow people in her house. Has a dog, Lucy. Submitted a painting called "Fair Day" to the Gallery of Art Willimsburg.
- **Inspector Jean Guy Beauvair** – 35 years old. Second in Command of Homicide under Gamache.
- **Oliver Brule** – One of the owners of the Bistro and the B&B. Lives with Gabriel Dubeau. Loves antiques. Gay. Very neat and tidy.
- **Matthew Croft** – Villager. Well known and successful bow hunter. Has a son, Phillippe and wife Suzanne.
- **Gabriel Dubeau** – One of the owners of the Bistro and the B&B. Lives with Oliver Brule. Loves antiques. Gay. Large and flamboyant.
- **Yolande Fontaine** – Jane Neal's niece. Real estate agent. Generally unlikable. Husband is Andre Malenfant. Son is Bernard Malenfant.
- **Solange Frenette** – Notary. Has a new baby.
- **Benjamin Hadley** – Found Jane's body. Friends of Peter and Clara Morrow. Mother, Timmer Hadley, recently died of Cancer. Has an old dog, Daisy.

- **Myrna Landers** - Bookshop owner. Former psychologist. Black. Likes to make flower arrangements.
- **Peter Morrow** – Wife Clara. Handsome and put together. Loves Clara. Successful artist.
- **Agent Yvette Nichol** – New agent seconded to Gamache and the Jane Neal murder.
- **Nellie Robertson** – Housekeeper for Benjamin Hadley. Husband Wayne has a bad cough.
- **Norman Stickley** – Notary in Williamsburg. Had Jane’s 10 year old will.
- **Ruth Zardo** – Peter and Clara's friend. Volunteer fire chief. Blunt, rude, and stubborn. Has cane. Well known poet.
- Art Jury for the Gallery of Art Williamsburg.:
 - **Henri Lariviere** – Sculptor.
 - **Irene Calfat** – Potter. Self-absorbed and petty.
 - **Elise Jacob**
 - Peter and Clara Morrow
- Masked Boys, identified by Jane Neal, who threw duck manure at Bistro and shouted homophobic slurs.
 - Phillipe Croft – Apologized and said he would work off the incident at the bistro.
 - Gus Hennessey
 - Claude LePierre

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. This book is written from multiple points of view. Was it well done? Was it effective? Why or why not?
3. Did you like the pacing of this book? Too fast, too slow, or just right?
4. Aside from the name of the main characters, did the fact that this story took place in French speaking Montreal have any impact on the plot? If yes, how?
5. At the beginning of Still Life, we are told that “violent death still surprised” Chief Inspector Armand Gamache. Why is that odd for a homicide detective, and how does it influence his work? What are his strengths and his weaknesses?
6. Gamache says that there are four sayings that lead to wisdom: “I was wrong. I'm sorry. I don't know. I need help.” Do you think these ideas are as important in everyday life as Gamache thinks they are in police life? Do you use any of them in your own life?
7. Agent Nichols is a controversial character in this book. What do you think of her? What purpose does she serve?
8. Why do you think the village of Three Pines is not on any map? Is this a benefit or disadvantage? Does it make the village special? What do you think?

9. When Gamache and Agent Nicole first arrive at Three Pines, see a lovely old world tableau broken by police cars; “The snakes in Eden.” Can you find other echoes of Paradise in Three Pines, and what role do snakes—real or metaphorical—play there?
10. There are three main couples in the book: Clara and Peter, Olivier and Gabri, and Gamache and Reine-Marie. How would you characterize each of these relationships?
11. Gamache says “I’ve never met anyone uniformly kind and good,” yet no one has anything bad to say about Jane – except regarding her art. What is your impression of that art? What makes something “art”?
12. What do you think Jane was trying to show/teach a young Yolande when playing the game with the Queen of Hearts?
13. When the charred arrowhead is found in his home, it is said that Matthew Croft “had finally been hurt beyond poetry.” How does poetry help him and other characters in this novel? Does it ever have the power to hurt?
14. What do you think of Timmer Hadley’s idea that “There’s something about Ruth Zardo, something bitter, that resents happiness in others, and needs to ruin it. That’s probably what makes her a great poet, she knows what it is to suffer.” In your opinion, do any other professions have the same need for bitterness or sadness? Which ones?
15. Myrna stopped practicing psychology because she lost patience with people who lead “still” lives, “waiting for someone to save them....The fault lies with us, and only us. It’s not fate, not genetics, not bad luck, and it’s definitely not Mom and Dad. Ultimately it’s us and our choices.” How do their choices affect the principal characters in the novel? Do any of their choices remind you of ones you have made in your own life?
16. Do you think that Jane knew about the circumstances of Timmer’s death when she painted “Fair Day” or was it just a tragic happenstance that ended with her death?
17. Did you know or suspect who had killed Jane Neal before the story told you?
18. There’s a huge clue to the murder early in the book, when Jane gives Ben a meaningful look and then quotes from W. H. Auden: “Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table.” Why is it so easy to overlook that clue at the time, and what impact does it have when it’s quoted again in the last chapter?
19. Who do you think Gamache has in mind when he tells Gabri and Olivier: “You’re not the types to do murder. I wish I could say the same for everyone here.”
20. Clara has “very specific tastes” in murder mysteries: “Most of them were British and all were of the village cozy variety.” Do you see **Still Life** as a typical “cozy”? Why or why not?
21. Penny Louise has written 14 books in the Chief Inspector Gamache series. Will you read them?

References:

- Fantastic Fiction – <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/p/louise-penny/>
- Lit Lovers – <http://www.litlovers.com/reading-guides/fiction/8675-still-life-penny?start=3>
- Louise Penny's Website – <https://www.louisepenny.com/>
- Novelist – <http://web.a.ebscohost.com/novp/detail?vid=2&sid=b0bc3b0f-3e1c-4ecb-ac72-7a685f62506b%40sessionmgr4006&bdata=JnNpdGU9bm92cC1saXZl#UI=143394&db=neh>

Louise Penny Books

Chief Inspector Gamache

- | | |
|---|------------------------------------|
| 1. Still Life (2005) | 6.5. The Hangman (2010) |
| 2. Dead Cold (2006) <i>aka A Fatal Grace</i> | 7. A Trick of the Light (2011) |
| 3. The Cruellest Month (2007) <i>aka The Cruellest Month</i> | 8. The Beautiful Mystery (2012) |
| 4. The Murder Stone (2008) <i>aka A Rule Against Murder</i> | 9. How the Light Gets In (2013) |
| 5. The Brutal Telling (2009) | 10. The Long Way Home (2014) |
| 6. Bury Your Dead (2010) | 11. The Nature of the Beast (2015) |
| | 12. A Great Reckoning (2016) |
| | 13. Glass Houses (2017) |
| | 14. Kingdom of the Blind (2018) |

If you liked Still Life, try...

- The Mistletoe Murder – PD James
- In the Bleak Midwinter – Julia Spencer-Fleming
- Great Deliverance – Elizabeth George
- The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie – Alan Bradley
- In the Shadow of the Glacier – Vicki Delany