

The Widows Discussion Questions

by Jess Montgomery

Author Bio: (from Fantastic Fiction & Jess Montgomery website)

Jess Montgomery is the author of the Kinship Historical Mystery series, focusing on a 1920s female sheriff in Appalachia.



Under Jess's given name, she is a newspaper columnist, focusing on the literary life, authors, and events of her native Dayton, Ohio for the Dayton Daily News.

Characters:

- **Lily Ross** – (26) – Jail mistress - records prisoners and keeps jail clean. Husband, Daniel, is the sheriff. Has 2 children – Jolene (6) and Micah (4) with a third on the way. Daughter of the town grocer. Father, Caleb McArthur, died trying to rescue people during the Widowmaker mine collapse.
- **Daniel Ross** – Kinship sheriff. Shot and killed while transporting a prisoner from Rossville to Kinship. Wife is Lily. Former boxer managed by George Vogel. Was looking for Marvena's missing daughter, Eula.
- **Marvena Whitcomb** – Moonshiner. Common-law husband, John, was killed during the Widowmaker mine collapse. 2 daughters – Frankie (6) and Eula (16). Has taken over union organizing since John's death. Brother - Tom.
- **Eula Witcomb** – (16) – Marvena's daughter. Was working at the boarding house. Disappeared in February. Daniel was looking into her disappearance.
- **John Rutherford** – Union organizer. Marvena's common law husband. Daughter is Frankie (6) and stepdaughter Eula (16). Died trying to rescue people during the Widowmaker mine collapse.
- **Tom** – Marvena's brother. Miner. In Rossville lockup for disturbing the peace. Daniel was sent to transfer him to Kinship jail on the morning Daniel was killed. Currently missing. Son is Alistair (11).
- **Hildy Cooper** – Lily's best friend. Was engaged to Lily's brother, Roger, before he died in the war.
- **Harvey Grayson** – Pinkerton mine guard with harelip and scar by eye. Was the person who sent Daniel to pick up prisoner from Rossville.
- **Ada Guttschalk** – Widowed farmer whose worker, Rusty Murphy, found Daniel.
- **Abe Miller** – Tonic salesman. One of George Vogel's men. Agent/enforcer.
- **Joann Moyer** – Runs the Rossville boardinghouse.
- **Rusty Murphy** – Guttschalk farmhand who found Daniel's body. Not too bright. Not seen since.
- **Elias Ross** – Daniel's uncle. Retired doctor who raised Daniel. Current coroner. Wife and daughter died during an influenza outbreak. Luther currently lives with him.
- **Luther Ross** – Manager and owner of Ross mining. Daniel's older half-brother.
- **Ben Russo** – Bureau of Mines employee. Daniel's old friend from the war.

- **Jurgis Sacovech** – Miner and union organizer. Took over union after John died. John’s best friend.
- **Nana Sacovech** – Midwife and herbwoman in Rossville. Jurgis’ mother. Lithuanian.
- **George Vogel** – Boxing manager/promoter. Trained Daniel before the war. Currently packages a “medicinal” elixir with high alcohol content (during Prohibition).
- **Martin Weaver** – Part-time deputy. Owns/runs a shoe shop in Kinship. Wife Fiona.
- **Lloyd Zimmer** – Miner beaten and killed for union organizing. Wife is Rowena.

Terms & other Info:

- **Kinship** – Town near the Ross mines.
- **Rossville** – Coal mining company town. Mine owned by Luther Ross.
- **Kinship Tree** – 3 trees twined together to make one trunk – Sycamore, Maple, and Beech.
- **Widowmaker mine collapse** – September 1924. Methane explosions killed miners and rescuers.
- **Company Store/ company town/ company house/ company doctor, etc.** – Miners work for company scrip instead of money. The company owns the homes, stores, etc. and set prices for items and services. The workers buy items from the company using the earned scrip.
- **Tent city** – Workers who do not have scrip for company houses live in tents near the company town.
- **Pinkerton Guards** – Guards from the Pinkerton company who help police the mines.
- **Maude Collins** – Historically, Ohio’s first female sheriff.
 - Appointed in Southeast Ohio in 1925 after her sheriff husband died in a shooting.
- **Battle of Blair Mountain** is a factual event of the fight to unionize the coal mining operations in the Appalachian region. The coal seams are still burning 130 years after the fires were set to sabotage the mines in protest of unfair wages and practices.

Discussion Questions:

1. Did you like the book? Why or why not?
2. Who was/were “The Widows” referenced in the title? Are any of the women in the book not widows? What does that say about living in a coal mining town in the 1920’s?
3. Had you considered Southeast Ohio to be Appalachia before reading this book? Why or why not?
4. This book was written from a dual point of view. Was it done well? Did you like seeing the story from both points of view? Why or why not?
5. Marvena and Lily each lend a unique point of view to this novel. What draws these two women together? What keeps them apart? Which woman did you relate to more?
6. In Chapter 7, Lily notes that the men who have offered her the role of sheriff have underestimated her. In what ways do you think her actions exemplify this observation? How does this statement relate to Marvena, too - could you say that she, too, is underestimated?

7. Flashbacks from both women are prominent in “The Widows”. What role do they play in expanding our understanding of the women? Of the mystery at hand?
8. Marvena and Lily each have a support group, but of very different kinds. How have the people around them made them the women they are?
9. When Lily is preparing to enter the mine in Chapter 26, Martin tries to stop her, insinuating that it’s bad luck for a woman to enter a mine. Lily returns with, “I think we’re past worrying about bad luck.” How does the idea of luck, or fate, thread through this novel? How does it feed into the relationships between the various men and women characters? How have those roles changed by the end?
10. Why is there such acrimony between the miners and the Kinship townspeople?
11. Daniel’s past - and a number of his present-day secrets - are uncovered throughout the novel. Did your view of him change by the final pages?
12. Marvena and Lily become the strongest spokespeople for the men in the towns who have no voice. How is it that two women become the main negotiators in two male dominated industries?
13. “The Widows” pits two strong women (Marvena and Lily) against two powerful men (George Vogel and Luther Ross). Would you say the men are reflections of the women, or their opposites?
14. Who was the villain of the book? Why?
15. In the end, Marvena and Lily decide to forgo individual justice and revenge to get community justice. Do you think it was the right call? Why or why not?
16. At the end of the book, everyone is picking blackberries. What is the significance of that action? Why is it important?
17. As shown in the Author’s Note, both Marvena and Lily have their basis in real, historical women. Does that knowledge deepen or change your understanding of the novel in any way? If so, how?
18. The history of unions and union busting is not really taught in schools. Is this something that should have more time devoted to it or is it something that should be left on the back burner of history? Why or why not?
19. Montgomery has written a couple of other books in this series. Will you read them?

References:

- Fantastic Fiction – <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/m/jess-montgomery/>
- MacMillian – <https://images.macmillan.com/folio-assets/discusion-guides/9781250184528DG.pdf>
- Jess Montgomery – <https://jessmontgomeryauthor.com/jess/>
- Novelist – <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.clevnet.org/novp/detail?vid=2&sid=0ecb9512-b114-402c-b226-286ca7cdee73%40sdc-v-sessmgr03&bdata=JnNpdGU9bm92cC1saXZl#UI=10748851&db=neh>

Jess Montgomery Books

Kinship

1. The Widows (2019)
 2. The Hollows (2020)
 3. The Stills (2021)
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- Girl in Disguise – Greer Macallister
 - Girl Waits with Gun – Amy Stewart
 - King's Mountain – Sharyn McCrumb
 - The Well and the Mine – Gin Phillips
 - The Last Ballad – Wiley Cash
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