

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide
Orphan Train
By Christina Baker Kline

Author:

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*. She served as Writer-in-Residence at Fordham University from 2007 to 2011 and was an on-staff editor and writing coach at the social networking site SheWrites.com.

Kline is coeditor, with Anne Burt, of a collection of personal essays called *About Face: Women Write About What They See When They Look in the Mirror*. She 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 is co-author, with her mother, Christina Looper Baker, of a book on feminist mothers and daughters, *The Conversation Begins*. Her essays, articles, and reviews have appeared in *San Francisco Chronicle*, *the Literarian*, *Coastal Living*, *More*, *Psychology Today*, and others. Kline is currently at work on a literature anthology for *Facing History & Ourselves* and a novel based on the iconic painting *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth.

Kline was born in Cambridge, England, and raised there as well as in the American South and Maine. She is a graduate of Yale, Cambridge, and the University of Virginia, where she was a Henry Hoyns Fellow in Fiction Writing. In addition to Fordham, she has taught fiction and nonfiction writing, poetry, English literature, literary theory, and women's studies at Yale, New York University, and Drew University. She is a recent recipient of a Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation Fellowship, a Writer-in-Residence Fellowship at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and a Fordham Faculty Research Grant. She donates her time and editing skills to a number of organizations in New Jersey and Maine, including Volunteer Lawyers for Justice (www.volunteerlawyersnj.org) and JumpStart (jstart.org).

Kline has worked as a caterer, cook, and personal chef on the Maine coast, Martha's Vineyard, and in Charlottesville, Virginia. She lives in an old house in Montclair, New Jersey, with her husband, David Kline, and three boys, Hayden, Will, and Eli. She spends summers with extended family in an even older house on Mount Desert Island in Maine. (*From the author's website.*)

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 luck or chance. 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 author's website.*)

Questions:

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 from the author's website.)