

Readers' Discussion Questions

1. How does Molly's view of her hometown evolve during the story? What are the strengths of the small town? The weaknesses?
2. How is Molly typical of the "sandwich generation"?
3. Woodson Trask is a complicated man. Discuss his good points and bad points.
4. What aspects of her life does Molly have control over and what things can't she control?
5. On what basis does Blacks For Progress file a lawsuit against Alderson High School? Are the complaints justified?
6. Tracking students has long been an issue in public high schools. Should different tracks exist, or should all students be held to the same standards?
7. Though Molly and Liz are friends, they have never discussed any aspect of race. When Molly finally asks some questions of Liz, what does she learn?
8. Lies, small and large, form an important thread in the novel. Near the novel's beginning, Molly tells lies, one to her father's boss about why Woodson missed work, one to Mrs. Alford about her lipstick, and another to her son Quinn about the cookies she had intended to bring home to the boys. Woodson lies about his alcoholism. Woodson claims Molly's mother never lied, but Molly remembers it differently. Molly's son Graham lies to her. Her neighbor Lodge Piscetelli lies about why he moved to Alderson. J.D. Marshall also lies to Molly at school, and in the end, she lies to J.D. about why his mother killed his stepfather. Which lies felt acceptable to you? Which ones didn't? How pervasive is lying in our culture?
9. Name several problems Molly faces as a 40-year-old widow who would like to have romance in her life again. What missteps in judging men does she make?
10. How does the recession affect Alderson High School classrooms? Are the schools in your community facing similar issues?
11. How do the problems caused by the recession add humor to the novel?
12. Initially Molly views Reverend Bolden as an adversary. How do her views change? What do the two have in common?
13. J. D. Marshall challenges Molly's philosophy that no children are throwaways. Discuss the strategies she uses to work with him, what things complicate their relationship, and the outcome.
14. What successful moments does Molly have as a teacher?
15. Think back over your own school years. What were the most important traits of the teachers who influenced your life? Was there a "Miss Baker" in your school?