

Reading Group Topics for Discussion

The book opens with the main character waking up and not knowing where she is. What role does alcohol play in these characters' lives? Whose fault, if anyone's, is it that Helen got pregnant? What do the characters think about this question? Would the drunken library sex between Helen and Quentin be considered date rape today? Discuss.

Throughout the book, Helen observes that, to save herself, she must present a false version of herself, at one point noting that "a quality of which she was not particularly proud, the ability to dissemble, had become useful armor." Discuss this theme of false self/real self.

A related theme is the impact of secrets within a family. Who else besides Helen grapples with a secret? Why do they keep secrets? Why do they disclose them? Discuss.

Sandy's mother advises Rosemary to "avoid eye contact" with Helen. Discuss how mother and daughter struggle to find both closeness to and separation from each other. Contrast their relationship with Helen's friendship with Francie.

What do you make of the book's epigraph, "One is not born, but rather becomes, woman"? How does this statement apply to the female characters in this novel? What external forces mold the way they become "woman"? What, if any, are the internal forces?

The narrator says that Helen's parents' attitude toward the civil rights movement is mostly "abstract." After World War II, all-white subdivisions like theirs were funded by the Veterans' Administration, which refused to insure mortgages for Black soldiers' families. Is your community racially segregated? What has changed over 60 years? What has not? Discuss.

In providing illegal abortions, why do you think that Ilse and Pearl were willing to put themselves at such risk? How do attitudes toward abortion in Helen's world compare with attitudes today? Discuss.

Have you had an abortion? How did you feel about it? Have you discussed it with family and friends or did you keep it a secret? Is terminating an unwanted pregnancy still treated as shameful and wrong in your community? Discuss.

"He had heard her say, so many times, that a society that approved of making abortion illegal was a society that approved of violence against women . . ." *The Cider House Rules*, John Irving. Discuss.

In the midst of her miscarriage, Helen ponders the ethics of killing a 10-week old fetus compared with killing a fly, a pollywog, or a mouse. Discuss.

At the end of the novel, Helen writes to Francie, "I'm confused about sex. Sober sex anyhow. Ha ha." Discuss Helen's relationship with her body. How and to what extent has feminism challenged attitudes toward women's bodies that were taken for granted in Helen's world?

This coming-of-age story is also a heroic journey—Helen ventures into unknown territory seeking something of value, overcomes great adversity, and returns home transformed. What makes a hero? Who are the heroes in this book? Discuss.