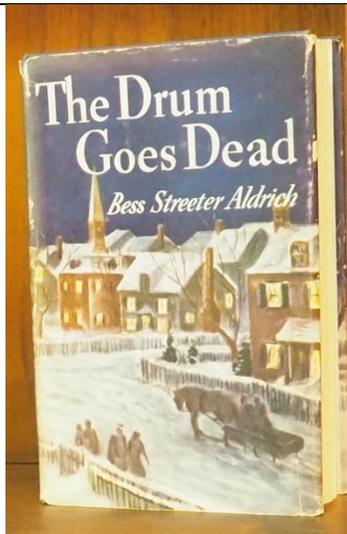


Book Discussion Questions for *The Drum Goes Dead* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"



The original jacket cover was illustrated by Bess's son, James Aldrich. The original edition of the book is on display at the Aldrich Museum. For more information on this book, please contact aldrichfoundation@gmail.com.

About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 8th child of James Wareham Streeter and Mary Wilson Anderson Streeter. Her closest sibling was ten years older, so she described herself as having the "world's record for the number of bosses over her."¹ As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her degree from Iowa State Normal School in 1901, then she taught for several years. During this time, she met Cap (Charles) Aldrich. They were married on September 24, 1907. In 1909, their daughter was born. Soon after, they moved to Elmwood, Nebraska, to run the American Exchange Bank in Elmwood with Bess' sister and brother-in-law. By 1920, the Aldrich family also included three sons. During these years, Bess would find snatches of time to write. She published many short stories in magazines, and some of her serials became books. When her husband died in 1925, Bess' hobby became necessary for her family's livelihood. Over time, Bess wrote nine novels. Additional stories were combined into compilations. Bess died on August 3rd, 1954. In 1972, she was named to the "Nebraska Hall of Fame" and is now a part of the display at the Nebraska Capitol.

"The Drum Goes Dead"

Setting: Small town of Bellfield (the state is not noted)

Time period: This book is set during the 1930's, during the middle of the Great Depression.

Plot summary: Richard Lanning is the bank cashier. Because the community was in the middle of the Depression, everyone was filled with worries and carries. Due to his place in the community, many confide their cares to him, and he struggles to try to help everyone. Finding out about others' favorite Christmases helps him feel better. Ultimately the cure for his unhappiness takes place when he reluctantly plays the role of Santa Claus again at the community program. He comes to realize that "the world was not in chaos to these children."

Plus he sees that his role in the community is invaluable. Even though the circumstances did not change, there is hope.

¹ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

The Drum Goes Dead characters

Grace Lanning	“loving the old traditions”
Richard Lanning	“How could he be Christmasy this year?” “No one but a cad could destroy the family’s enthusiasm.”
Alice Lanning	16 years old and wishing Christmas break was longer
Eldon Lanning	12 years old – loud and boisterous
Bank employees	George Adams (President’s “wise-cracking” son); Elise Rouse (“not-so-young” cashier);
Bank customers	Miss Jarman, retired teacher who is caring for her father, the last GAR man, Marshal Jarman; Hulda Bornheimer, former employee now farmer’s wife; Jake, a trucker whose wife has to have an operation; J.B., a “taciturn” merchant; Marian, who had to be a maid rather than a student; the older woman (called grandma) who recalls Christmas with her kids at home; the optimistic professor who calls for cheer
Town program	Mrs. Henry Neiman; Amy Anderson; Joey Meyers and more

1) This story was published in 1936 after the Depression had been going on for several years.

Do you think that fact impacted the tone of the story? What was the author’s intent?

2) Do you agree with the author: “stories are seldom written about the Richard Lannings?” Why or why not?

3) Do you think it is significant that Aldrich chose a bank cashier to be her main character in this story as opposed to a shop keeper or teacher?

4) How did listening to the customers recall their favorite Christmases impact Richard’s perspective?

5) Bank customers are adults. Why do you think the children bestowed such an honor on Richard Lanning?

6) Why did Richard feel “young and hopeful and a bit Christmasy” at the end of the story?