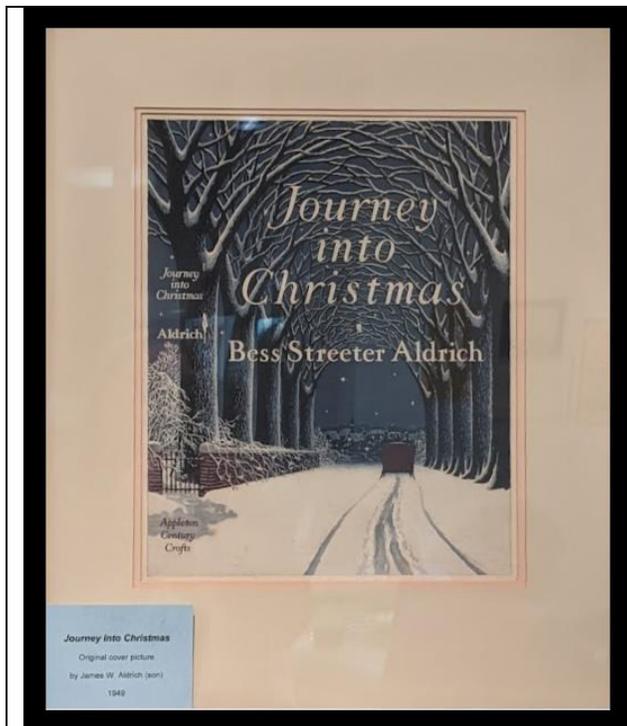


Book Discussion Questions for *Journey into Christmas* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"



The original jacket cover was illustrated by Bess's son, James Aldrich. This painting 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.

Journey into Christmas, a compilation of twelve Christmas short stories, was published November 11, 1949. "As with all the Aldrich books, it sold well, going into three printings before Christmas."²

All of the stories found in *Journey into Christmas* were published in magazines first.

"A Journey into Christmas," story one, was originally published in the *Christian Herald* in November 1947.

"Star Across the Tracks," story two, was published in the December 25, 1948 *Saturday Evening Post* 221.

"The Drum Goes Dead," story three, was originally published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1936.

"Youth Is All of an Up-and-Coming," story four, was first published in *Physical Culture Magazine* in May 1931.

"The Man Who Caught the Weather," story five, was originally published in *Century Magazine* in July 1928.

"Bid the Tapers Twinkle," story six was in *The Ladies Home Journal* Issue 52 in January 1935.

"Christmas on the Prairie," story seven, is from *A Lantern in Her Hand*, book first published in 1928.

"Low Lies His Bed," story eight, was originally published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1934.

"Another Brought Gifts," story nine, was first published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1936.

"Suzanne's Own Night," story ten, is from *A Song of Years*, which was first a serialized novel and was published weekly in *The Saturday Evening Post* during December 1938 (10,17,24,31) and January 1939 (7, 14, 21).

"The Silent Stars Go By," story eleven, was originally published in *Cosmopolitan* in January 1933.

"I Remember," story twelve, is almost autobiographical and was first published in *McCall's*, November 1926.

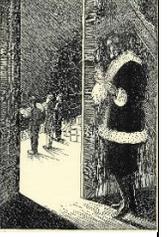
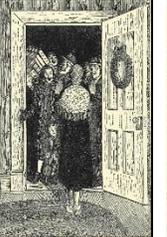
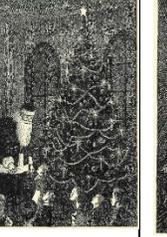
¹ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

² Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Peterson, c. 1995 University of Nebraska Press (page 198)

Journey into Christmas

Overall questions

- 1) Which story is your favorite from the *Journey into Christmas and Other Stories* Collection?
- 2) Which story could you relate to the most?
- 3) Where there any stories that you did not particularly enjoy? Why?
- 4) The stories were published over a period of twenty-two years. Did Mrs. Aldrich's writing change during that time? How did the world change during that time?
- 5) Eight different magazines published the stories first. Do you think that impacted any of the stories?
- 6) What was the overall tone of the stories as a collection?
- 7) Did Mrs. Aldrich consistently use any themes in these Christmas stories?
- 8) Which story do you think relates more closely to Advent?
- 9) Mrs. Aldrich wrote quite a few stories set at Christmastime. Why did she choose that time of year?
- 10) James Aldrich illustrated these stories for the book. Do you think that added depth to the book or took away from the stories?

							
"Journey into Christmas"	"Star Across the Tracks"	"The Drum Goes Dead"	"The Man who Caught the Weather"	"Bid the Tapers Twinkle"	"Low Lies His Bed"	"Another Brought Gifts"	"The Silent Stars Go By"

“A Journey into Christmas”

Plot summary: When her family cannot come home for Christmas, Margaret spends the evening remembering her favorite Christmases from the past.

Margaret Staley	A widow who is about to spend her 60 th Christmas alone
Don & Janet, young Ralph	Live in California – traveling home for Christmas is too far
Ruth Staley	“career daughter, connected with a children’s hospital” – too hard to get away
Jeanie & Husband, Roy	Two boys (Bud, Larry) were in quarantine
Lee & Ann	Live in Oklahoma – at first, Margaret did not understand why they did not come

- 1) What sort of “self-talk” does Margaret engage in to try to keep her spirits up?
- 2) What was in the letters from her children?
- 3) Which memory of a Christmas past stands out to you – in the book and in your own life?
- 4) What news takes away the ache of not being with family? Do you think it should have been kept a surprise?
- 5) How did Margaret’s perspective of the empty semicircle of chairs change over the course of the night?

“Star Across the Tracks”

Plot summary: Harm Kurtz is a gardener in charge of three houses in High View. “Tomorrow night was Christmas Eve and in preparation for the annual prizes given by the federated civic clubs, his three families had gone in for elaborate outdoor decorations.” Everyone is surprised by the winner.

Pa (Harm) Kurtz	“slight and wiry, all muscle and bounce”
Ma Kurtz	“waddle” “she wore her hair combed high, brushed tightly up at the back and sides where it ended in a hard knot at the top of her head”
Lillie Kurtz	Youngest; worked in the Dillingham Department Store as a seamstress in the remodeling department
Ernie Kurtz	Works for River City Body and Fender Wreck Company; middle child
Carrie (Kurtz)	Oldest daughter; Now married to Bert with two little boys
Scotts	“him I like, her I don’t”; “rambling stone of the ranch type”; Mrs. Scott “knew the least about vegetation of anyone who had ever come under Pa’s scrutiny”; “she had a little cripple son who took most of her time”; “he was a doctor .. who stopped & joked a bit”
Dillinghams	“her I like, him I don’t”; house: “both brick and stone, to say nothing of stained shingles, lumber, tiles, glass bricks and stucco”; favorite yard – “informal and woodsy”; she worked with him; “when Mr. Dillingham came home from his big department store, he was loud and officious, sometimes critical”
Porters	“both I don’t like”; “brick colonial”; 4 school age children; he was a Councilman and a lawyer; she was member of Garden Club – she “went in for formal beds”

- 1) This story was originally titled, “Mr. Kurtz and Christmas.” Which title do you think fits the story better?
- 2) What did Mamma get on Pa about doing before Carrie’s family arrived? What did he do next?
- 3) What was Mamma’s motivation for putting up the display in the shed?
- 4) How did the three High View families decorate their houses? What did the Kurtz family think?
- 5) Which house won the contest? Why do you think those decorations appealed to the judges?

“The Drum Goes Dead”

Plot summary: Characters: Richard Lanning is the Bellfield bank cashier. During the Depression, everyone in the community was filled with worries and carries. Due to his place in the community, many confide their cares to him; he tries to support 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 at the community program again. He comes to realize that “the world was not in chaos to these children.” Hope!

Grace Lanning	“loving the old traditions”; Richard’s wife
Richard Lanning	“How could he be Christmasy this year?” “No one but a cad could destroy the family’s enthusiasm.” Hard worker but discouraged
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, Marshal Jarman, Hulda Bornheimer, Jake, J.B., Marian, older one, professor
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) How did listening to the customers recall their favorite Christmases impact Richard’s perspective?
- 4) Bank customers are adults. Why do you think the children bestowed such an honor on Richard Lanning?
- 5) Why did Richard feel “young and hopeful and a bit Christmasy” at the end of the story?

“Youth Is All of an Up-and-Coming”

Plot summary: This story is about a loving, farming family. When the kids were grown, the couple moved to a small town. Their neighbors who were quite surprised to discover this couple had a secret.

Characters:

Pa Stoltenberg	Solid, substantial; agile for almost 70 years of age; “long, thin” arms”
Ma	“heavy bulk”; “short fat arms”; she loved to cook for her family
2 daughters	Minnie, Rosa; both are teachers
5 sons	Include 2 farmers, a printer and 2 unknown; possibly all had families
Mother and me	Neighbors; First person narrators telling the story from their perspective

- 1) Why do you think the Stolenbergs moved to town?
- 2) What is meant by the quote, “Youth is all of an up-and-coming when the blood is warm?”
- 3) Why were the Stoltenbergs avoiding talking about the folks back from Illinois?
- 4) From the beginning of the story, a Christmas mystery is mentioned? Did you guess the mystery? If not, what did you think was going to be revealed?
- 5) “Christmas – it is a time of peace.” Do you think Mrs. Stoltenberg is referencing her own state of mind?

“The Man Who Caught the Weather”

Plot summary: Mr. Parline lived his life according to the weather, and it impacted those around him.

Characters:

Parlines	English yet Vermont; “refined, gentle folk, but different and a little queer”
Mr. Parline	Immaculate housewife, shy effacing; rarely leaves their property; quilter
Mrs. Parline	Stocky body, ruddy complexion, fuzzy face; gardener; obsessed with the weather

1) “To old Mr. Parline, the weather was not the background, it was the picture of life itself. If the day was bad, he was half apologetic. If it was pleasant, he glowed with satisfaction.” What does this quote explain about the theme of this story? Why was Mr. Parline obsessed with the weather?

2) How were the thermometers described? Why were they everywhere?

3) How did Mr. Parline demonstrate his love for his wife?

4) How did Mr. Parline care for the neighbors? Did he realize that they appreciated him?

5) Did he come to a fitting end? Should the story have stopped there or were the final reflections helpful?

“Bid the Tapers Twinkle”

Plot summary: Sara Atkin continues with her celebratory preparations even when she finds out her family cannot come back for Christmas.

Characters:

Sara Atkin	One of the town’s early settlers; widow of John; great-grandmother
Jennie Williams	House help who “had grown fat and forty waiting for Mrs. Atkin to find another girl.”
Richard (Dickie)	Lawyer; muddled childhood Christmas program line – now misquoted as a family joke; married to Clarice with son Jimmie
Eva	Concerned about mother’s efforts; married to Professor Fleming; Josephine’s mother
Arnold	Married to Mame with boys and daughter, Marian, who has a 9 month old baby
Helen	Married to farmer, Carl; could not afford to travel (drought) despite having no children

1) “We hang up garlands everywhere and bid the tapers twinkle fair.” Why did Sara keep saying this quote? How does it fit with the theme?

2) “To the Atkins family at large, Sara Atkin was Christmas.” How had the Atkins family celebrations changed through the years?

3) Why did Sara not tell Jennie her family was no longer coming? Why did she keep preparing?

4) What did the family assume about her excessive celebrations? How does this play into the storyline?

5) Did Sara’s family understand her perspective? Who might have understood her the best in the story?

“Christmas on the Prairie”

Plot summary: This chapter is two different excerpts from a book about a Nebraska homesteading family.

Characters: (*means child is mentioned in first half of the chapter as well)

Abbie Deal	Young homemaker fighting elements; Great-grandmother reminiscing
Will Deal	Trying to provide for his family on the prairie; (has passed away before 2 nd part)
Neighbors	Gus and Christine Reinmueller; Sarah Lutz (varying perspectives on Christmas)
*Mack Emma	Also brought son, Donald (Stanley with his wife’s family)
*Margaret & Dr. Fred	Also brough Dr. Fred Jr., his wife and 2 boys
*John & Eloise	Kids: Wentworth, Laura, Milliard
Grace	A Wesleyan University professor who arrived in her automobile
Kathrine	Daughter of Mack & Emma – also accompanied by Jimmie Buchanan

- 1) These are excerpts from *A Lantern in Her Hand*. Does that book need to be read to appreciate this chapter?
- 2) How did the arrival of the barrel help the family in celebrating Christmas?
- 3) What other inventive ways did the family make the 1874 Christmas special despite lack of resources?
- 4) Do you agree with Abbie that Christmas gifts are “not so full of the Christmas spirit when you don’t make them yourself?” Why or why not?
- 5) How did Katherine remember Christmas at Grandma Deal’s? What were some of the grown-up children’s favorite childhood memories? Which ones were mentioned in the first part of the chapter?

“Low Lies His Bed”

Plot summary: Old Mrs. Parker once lived down the street in a very nice home, but through the years, she has become destitute and now has to rely on the kindness of others. She is struggling with that reality.

Characters:

Mrs. David Daniel Parker	Older woman whose husband & children have died; Once wealthy, now poor
Mr. and Mrs. McIntosh	She is the matron of the Old Ladies Home – he helps her
Anna Kleinschmidt	Washer woman for the Parkers and others; earned her way with a bit of help
Theodore Harms	Paid \$100 for Anna’s stay and all of the money for Mrs. Parker
Others	Old Mrs. Murphy; Old Mrs. Tuttle; Old Mrs. Sargent

- 1) Rather than starting the story at the Ladies’ Home, the story starts on a train. Why?
- 2) What glimpses are given of what happened in between her place of prominence and her place of reliance?
- 3) How does Anna Kleinschmidt change the tone of the story?
- 4) Why did Mrs. Parker venture out to her old house? How did seeing it change her perspective?
- 5) “Cold on his cradle the dewdrops are shining, Low lies his bed with the beasts of the stall. Angels adore Him in slumber reclining, Maker and Monarch who cares for us all.” How does this quote sum up the story?

“Another Brought Gifts”

Plot summary: Through the years, Jed Miller helped the town especially by playing Santa Claus.

Characters:

“Old Jed Miller”	Humble, early settler; lived alone; played town Santa Claus
Town children	Tommie Graham, Johnnie Quinn
Mrs. Tobbin	“both a pillar and a power” – claims Jed is a nuisance; took over the pageant
Community	Doctor Waters; Reverend Julius Parkinson

- 1) How is Jed involved in the church?
- 2) How is Santa Claus portrayed in the 1880s and 1890s? How has that changed today?
- 3) How does the “Santa Claus quarter” play into the story?
- 4) How did the perspective of Jed change for the children as they got older?
- 5) What were Jed’s last words of advice? How did he impact his community for the better?

“Suzanne’s Own Night”

Plot summary:

Characters: On cold Christmas Eve 1855, a family gathers together in a log house near Iowa’s Red Cedar River.

Henry & Lucy	Came over from other house; she is “Madonna like”
Suzanne	Daughter who took the time to make or gather presents for everyone
Pa	Reminisces about Christmas in England
Ma	Reminisces about her ancestor (one if by land, two if by sea)
Others	Sarah, Sabina, Phineas, Emily, Jeanie, Phoebe Lou, Melinda, Celia

- 1) This is an excerpt from *Song of Years*. Does that book need to be read to appreciate this chapter?
- 2) At first, we only find out about the weather conditions. Why did the story start that way?
- 3) Why did Suzanne feel that Christmas Eve was her own night?
- 4) “Every poor quality about them fell away and only the good ones remained.” Suzanne is stating that she can only see the good in her people at Christmas. Do you think this is always the case for people?
- 5) “Christmas Eve was a night of song that wrapped itself about you like a shawl. But it warmed more than your body. It warmed your heart ... filled it, too, with melody that would last forever. Even though you grew up and found you could never quite bring back the magic feeling of this night, the melody would stay in your heart always -a song for all the years.” This quote ends the chapter and sums up how many people feel about Christmas. What resonates with you?

“The Silent Stars Go By”

Plot summary: After losing what she was thought was everything during the Depression, through sickness a woman comes to realize what matters most.

Characters:

Janet	Wife to Neal, mother to Michael and Dorothy
Neal	Husband to Janet; former 3 rd generation owner of Broderick’s
Michael	Son; in her dream, “what a comrade her father was making of Michael”
Dorothy	Daughter; in her dream, “what devotion existed between Dorothy and her mother.”
Mother	Departed; comes to Janet in a dream to help her gain perspective

- 1) Why did Janet feel like her life was over?
- 2) “Failure was not something she could tolerate as a human.” How did Janet’s need for perfection impact her life? Were her high expectations only for herself or for others also?
- 3) How do the carol lines, “above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by” play into the story?
- 4) “It was the spirit of our old home – more than things in it.” How did this statement by Janet’s mother impact her? How could it impact the generations today?
- 5) What was Janet’s deep desire? How might her life change after this illness and her dream?

“I Remember”

Plot summary: Bess Streeter Aldrich recalls certain scenes from her childhood memories. She also talks about her family, including her Streeter and Anderson relatives, along with the town where she lived and school.

Characters:

Her Family	Father & Mother, brothers & wives; sisters & wives;
Streeters	Grandfather (deceased); 7 Aunts (lively) & their families;
Andersons	Uncle Jim, Aunt Sarah, Grandmother Anderson, Aunts Jane, Margaret (Isabelle)

- 1) At the beginning of the story, she tells about an experience that seems disconnected. How does she draw this and other experiences together at the end? Why do you think that understanding Mrs. Aldrich’s background might be important to the reader?
- 2) Why do you think that she includes so many stories about her family’s arrival to Iowa from other locations?
- 3) Do you recognize any of the stories that she tells from her books or her own written short stories?
- 4) What memory could you relate to the most? Where there any memories that you wish would have been expanded on in this story or in a fictional setting?
- 5) How are her memories different or similar to your own? Are the differences generational, regional/geographical or socio-economical?