

Book Discussion Questions for The Rim of the Prairie by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 7th 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.

Photo is of "The Rim of the Prairie" room found at Bess Streeter Aldrich's former home in Elmwood, Nebraska.



About The Rim of the Prairie

This title was Bess Streeter Aldrich's first full length novel. This novel is set in the fictional town of Maple City, Nebraska. Full of interesting characters, this novel ponders life in both a small town and on the farm.

Carol Miles Peterson devoted chapter four in her Bess Streeter Aldrich biography to "The Rim of the Prairie." She notes why this novel was a significant work for Aldrich.

*"The Rim of the Prairie is probably the most personal of Aldrich's novels, for here she expresses her philosophies and also her deep regard for her husband more overtly than in any other work."*²

For additional information regarding the book or author, please contact "The Bess Streeter Aldrich Foundation" at aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

Background of Rim of the Prairie

Why was writing the book's dedication possibly a bittersweet experience for the author?

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

² Quoted from Bess Streeter Aldrich by Carol Miles Peterson (page 55)

Is Maple City similar or different than other Midwestern towns, specifically other Nebraska towns?

Some people might say that Maple City may be based on Aldrich's own town of Elmwood. What does an author have to do to make sure townspeople are not type-casted? How can she help people see themselves without identifying too closely?

Characterization

Which characters used the phrase, "The Rim of the Prairie," most often? Do you think this might be evident of a particular bond? Back then, the plains were wider open. Do you think this term could still be applied to Midwest land, specifically parts of Nebraska today?

This novel contains an interesting cast of minor characters, particularly at the boarding house. Did any one of them particularly appeal to you? Did any of them annoy you? Why or why not?

Plot

This story seems to be written in third person with a multi-person point of view. This approach is sometimes referred to as having an omniscient narrator. Did having the perspective of multiple characters add or detract from the story? Why?

What was the significance of the brown shawl?

Can you sympathize with why Nancy felt like she must leave for a season? Or did you feel like that she overreacted? Would you have wanted to come back?

Do you think Alice ever truly loved Warner? Or was she in love with the idea of him? Is there any clear cut proof in the story? Or do you have to jump to conclusions?

Did you predict that Warner and Nancy had a common connection to a particular person? Do agree with their initial reaction of obligation? Should they have allowed that to drive them apart? Or do you think true love should always find a way?

Did the natural disaster that drove them back to each other make sense in the story line? Or do you think that part was overly sensationalized?

Do you agree with Warner keeping the secret of his wife's parentage from her? Why or why not? Do you think that Nancy will try to find out about her parents for herself? Or is she now content to allow her past to remain a mystery? What reasoning helped to form your conclusion?

Thematic Elements

Two of the common themes in the book that I noticed seem to be forgiveness and restitution. Would you agree with that view? What other themes do you see that seem to be prevalent?

Further information for the Rim of the Prairie Book for the Discussion Facilitator

Why was writing the book's dedication possibly a bittersweet experience for the author? (Dedication: To the memory of my husband Captain Charles S. Aldrich, who loved the hills that rim the prairie")

Charles "Cap" Aldrich passed away unexpectedly when he was fifty-three years old. Days before, he had mailed off his wife's first full-length novel, Rim of the Prairie. While Bess must have rejoiced when the book was published, she was now a grieving widow. According to biographer, Carol Miles Peterson in her book, Bess Streeter Aldrich, the character of O.J. Rineland seems to act in a manner similar in personality and in function to the author's husband. Bess must have been glad that she had in a sense written him into the book that he sent off to the publisher on her behalf.

Is Maple City similar or different than other Midwest or specifically Nebraska towns? Answers will vary.

Some people might say that Maple City may be based on Aldrich's own town of Elmwood. What does an author have to do to make sure townspeople are not type-casted? How can she help people see themselves without identifying too closely? Answers will vary. Possibility – combining merging noticeable characteristics from one person with characteristics from additional people for more of a character composite sketch.

Characterization

Which characters used the phrase, "The Rim of the Prairie," most often? Do you think this might be evident of particular bond? Back then, the plains were wider open. Do you think this term could still be applied to Midwest land, specifically parts of Nebraska today?

Nancy uses the term in a conversation with Warner on pages 86-87. Then the term describes both of their view on page 356. Aunt Bliny first uses the term on page 135, then she talks about "the rim of the prairie" in a conversation with Nancy and Warner on page 346. The fact that these two characters both use that term seems to imply that they became more like mother and daughter over time. (Other mentions of this term: p. 93 (used by Warner), 216 (by Uncle Jud and Aunt Bliny). As for using the term, "rim of the prairie," answers will vary. Some parts of the Midwest are still wide open, but this is definitely less true today than long ago.

*This novel contains an interesting cast of minor characters, particularly at the boarding house. Did any one of them particularly appeal to you? Did any of them annoy you? Why or why not? **Character Recap***

Baldwin Twins: Miss Ann (cold-hearted, blunt, callous, impassive, focused on business, dictator-like, imposing) and Miss Rilla (emotional, diplomatic, sentimental, cares about people)

Major Slack Old Bachelor real estate agent; well-groomed; self-satisfied; often had final word

Martin Spencer Bank bookkeeper; table wit – added enlightening dinner conversation

Miss Sarah Gunn Whittier School principal; sensible; systematic; tried to divide work and fun

Helen Blakely English teacher; spoke with diction; tried to catch Dr. Pearson's eye

Dr. Pearson ("who on occasion thought no more of removing his appendix than moving his hat" p. 14)

George and Genevieve Kendall Married seven years; Childless; Him – furnace job; Her –no housekeeping desired; played table games as a hobby; couple went back and forth either bickering or getting along

Mary Mae Gates Vocal teacher; habitually tired from supposed demand; thought herself fine

Ambrose Jones Dry goods clerk; darted head here & there; not amusing; (could ask about mother – p. 210-212)

Plot

This story seems to be written in third person with a multi-person point of view. This is sometimes considered having an omniscient narrator. Did having the perspective of multiple characters add or detract from the story? Why? Answers will vary.

What was the significance of the brown shawl? Warner officially meets Nancy when he finds her wrapped up in the shawl right before she shoves it back into a locked drawer. (39-40) On page 103-104, the brown shawl makes an appearance as Nancy wore it on an errand to the Baldwins. (I missed this the first time through – did you?) Alice told Warner to ask about the brown shawl (130). Page 204 shows Warner trying to make connections. Alice confronts Nancy about the shawl (232-234). Nancy tells Warner that she was wrapped up in the brown shawl and left at the Biny & Jud’s door step as an infant. (256-257). The shawl returns again (314-315) when Nancy is ready to leave town for her new life. The full story is revealed in the “Brown Shawl” chapter and never mentioned again (340-344).

Can you sympathize with why Nancy felt like she must leave for a season? Or did you feel like that she over reacted? Would you have wanted to come back? Answers will vary.

Do you think Alice ever truly loved Warner? Or was she in love with the idea of him? Is there any clear cut proof in the story? Or do you have to jump to conclusions? Answers will vary.

Did you predict that Warner and Nancy had a common connection to a particular person? Do you agree with their initial reaction of obligation? Should they have allowed that to drive them apart? Or do you think true love should always find a way? Answers will vary. The debts are first discussed in the “I Love You” chapter (213-224), then the connection is established in “The Meeting” (243-253). Then Warner and Nancy’s connection together seems to be finished in “The End of the Story” (254-264).

Did the natural disaster that drove them back to each other make sense in the story line? Or do you think that part was overly sensationalized? Answers will vary in discussion about the tornado.

Do you agree with Warner keeping the secret of his wife's parentage from her? Why or why not do you feel this way? Do you think that Nancy will eventually try to find out about her parents for herself? Or is she content now to allow her past to remain a mystery? What reasoning helped to form your conclusion? Answers will vary. Warner does not seem like he will be willing to disclose the truth.

Thematic Elements

Two of the common themes in the book that I noticed seem to be forgiveness and restitution. Would you agree with that view? What other themes do you see that seem to be prevalent? Answers will vary, but here are some additional ideas to get the discussion started.

Farm living vs. Small Town Life

Duty vs. Calling

Love vs. Commitment

Poverty vs. Wealth

Pride vs. Truth (p. 349)