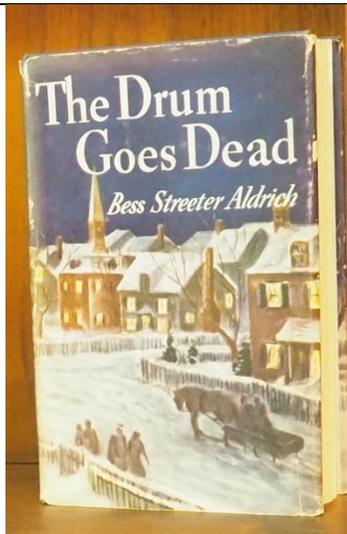


## Book Discussion Questions for *The Drum Goes Dead* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

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](mailto: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."<sup>1</sup> 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 3<sup>rd</sup>, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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?

The Depression definitely impacted this story, and the author seems to want to pass on hope.

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

Opinions may vary. Main characters in stories tend to be larger than life rather than ordinary.

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?

The Aldrich family was a part of the banking business. She wrote what she knew.

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

By hearing about the good in the world, Richard was able to recognize that not everything in the world was hopeless.

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

Although they may not have had as much contact with Richard Lanning, because of his repeated role as Santa, they could tell that he cared about the community.

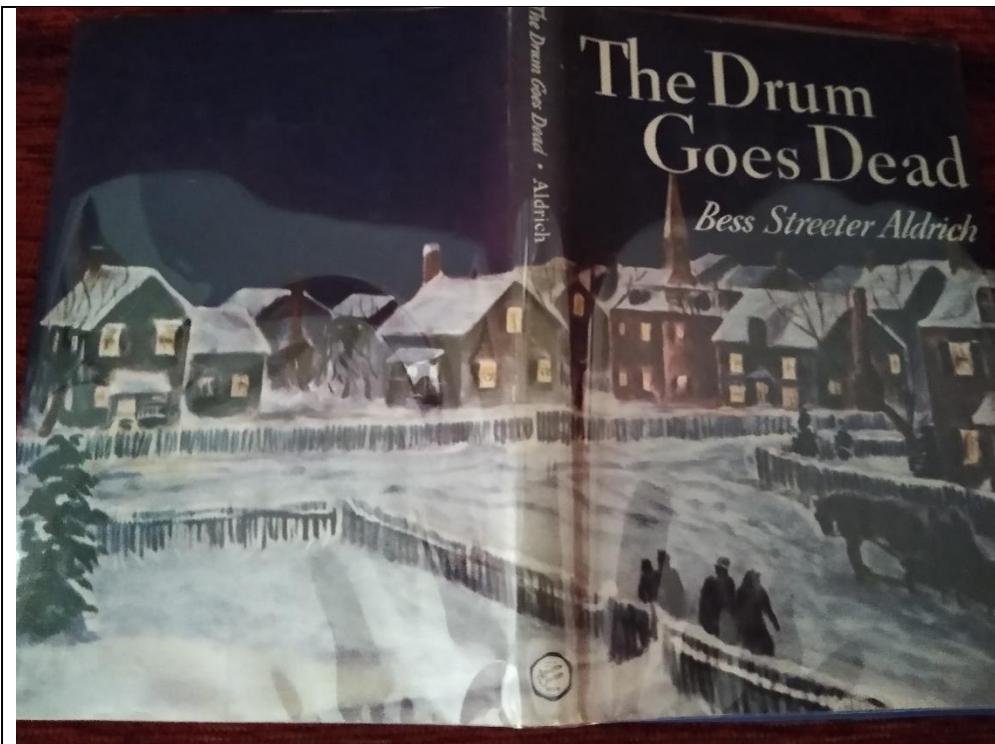
6) Why did Richard feel “young and hopeful and a bit Christmasy” at the end of the story?

Seeing the children gave him hope as he realized that “the world was not in chaos to these children.”

How “The Drum Goes Dead” Came to Be – A Newspaper Note from Mrs. Aldrich

“One September day I was working on a book manuscript when there came a long-distance call from the fiction editor of *Cosmopolitan*. They were making up the Christmas number and felt that it needed a homey, small town story. Could I get one written right away? An order for a Christmas story, with the hot winds blowing and the midwestern sun drying out the cornfields! It was one of those bad years in the 30s when crops were poor and every one was depressed. Some of that general feeling crept into my story and the result was ‘The Drum Goes Dead.’”<sup>2</sup>

“The Drum Goes Dead” appeared as a short story in the January 1938 issue of *Cosmopolitan*. This was actually their Christmas edition. D. Appleton-Century, then released the story as a short book in December 1941. Aldrich did not agree with this decision because of the fact that World War 2 was going on. The publishing editor, John Williams, disagreed with her as he felt the book was needed to brighten people’s spirits. He seems to be correct. The book was released on October 31<sup>st</sup>, and by December 1<sup>st</sup>, the book had already gone into a fourth printing with additional reprints expected later that month.<sup>3</sup>



Mrs. Aldrich’s son, James, painted the dust-jacket art. This was his first cover for one of his mom’s books. Later on, he did the cover for *The Lieutenant’s Lady* and *Journey into Christmas*. Did he capture the small-town feeling?

<sup>2</sup> *Chicago Tribune* “Mrs. Aldrich Star Writer of Yule Tales” (No other author noted) 4 December 1949 Part 4- Page 6

<sup>3</sup> Peterson, Carol Miles. *Bess Streeter Aldrich* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 186

## American Exchange Bank in Elmwood, Nebraska

Incorporated July 13, 1889 by T.E. Stevens, E.A. Stopher, W.S. Waters and C.D. Stevens. Chose symbol of eagle.  
Building cost: \$400 (purchased from Charles Rivett)  
Commencement: September 9, 1889 with capitol stock and surplus of \$14,000

April 1, 1909 Bank is purchased by Charles Aldrich and his brother-in-law, John P. Cobb. Charles becomes vice-president and John becomes bank president.

Byron Clements became part owner and director on March 1, 1910. His son, Guy, started as a clerk in 1906 and went on to be principal offer. He worked at the bank for 62 years. Mrs. Aldrich sold her stock to the Clements on July 15, 1938. Today the Clements family fully owns and operates this bank in Elmwood. This bank is probably the oldest one in Cass County.



Original Bank Building  
Photo Courtesy City of Elmwood

## Banks during the Great Depression - how Mrs. Aldrich kept the American Exchange Bank open

In 1933, President Franklin D. Roosevelt announced that all banks must close and not reopen unless they had enough cash to operate. As part owner of the bank, Mrs. Aldrich recognized that closing the bank would devastate the town. So she took action.

Robert Clements said, "I remember it as if it were yesterday. My grandmother telling me Mrs. Aldrich asked her to drive her to Lincoln. Mrs. Aldrich was insistent to speak to the director of the department of banking who had the power to close the banks. She did get to visit with him and she offered to provide as much capital to keep the bank open out of her own money. The amount she needed to restore it was about \$35,000." Mr. Clements estimated that to be equivalent to about one million dollars today.

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Mrs. Aldrich stood behind the counter of the bank. As concerned customers came into the bank, she reassured them that they could access all of their money at any time. This prevented a run on the bank. Per advanced agreement, no one knew until after her death that she was backing the bank with her own money. She also bought some local loans to keep community members in good standing.

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<sup>4</sup> "American Exchange Banks Celebrates 113 Years." *The Journal* (Plattsmouth, NE) 20 March 2003. Note: All of the information on this page, including the newspaper clipping, were documented from this article.

At the beginning of *The Drum Goes Dead* is a quote on which the title is based. British author, Nicholas Breton wrote, *Fanstasticks*, which was published in 1626 in London the year that he died. That book is also less than fifty pages, and this is the paragraph that contains the line. The clip mentioned in the front page of Aldrich's book is in bold-face type.

"It is now Christmas, and not a cup of drink must pass without a carol; the beasts, fowl, and fish come to a general execution, and the corn is ground to dust for the bakehouse and the pastry: cards and dice purge many a purse, and the youth show their agility in shoeing of the wild mare: now, good cheer, and welcome, and God be with you, and I thank you — and against the New Year provide for the presents — the Lord of Misrule is no mean man for his time, and the guests of the high table must lack no Wine: the lusty bloods must look about them like men, and piping and dancing puts away much melancholy: stolen venison is sweet, and a fat coney is worth money: pit-falls are now set for small birds, and a woodcock hangs himself in a gin: a good fire heats all the house, and a full alms-basket makes the beggar's prayers: — **the maskers and the mummers make the merry sport, but if they lose their money their drum goes dead** : swearers and swaggerers are sent away to the ale-house, and unruly wenches go in danger of judgment: musicians now make their instruments speak out, and a good song is worth the hearing. In sum it is a holy time, a duty in Christians for the remembrance of Christ and custom among friends for the maintenance of good fellowship. In brief I thus conclude it : I hold it a memory of the Heaven's love and the world's peace, the mirth of the honest, and the meeting of the friendly. Farewell."<sup>5</sup>

Does reading the full paragraph written by Breton help to understand Aldrich's book? Or does it add confusion? Would you have drawn the title out for the 1930's Christmas book? Breton's quote was found on a post written by Nebraska book store owner, Susan Williams. To read her lovely thoughts from December 2020 on *The Drum Goes Dead*, please visit her [website](#).

"Drums in My Heart"

As for the song mentioned in the book? "Drums in My Heart" is quite possibly from the musical play, *Through the Years*.<sup>6</sup> From January 28, 1932, until February 13, 1932, this musical had twenty Broadway performances the Manhattan Theater.<sup>7</sup> Since Mrs. Aldrich was in California during that time period <sup>8</sup>, she probably did not attend this play. But perhaps someone she knew was in attendance or maybe the song was played on the radio. You can listen [here](#).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://susansbooksandgifts.com/2020/12/17/christmas-bess-streeter-aldrich-keeping-beauty-in-perspective-regardless-of-present-circumstances-dec-2020/>

<sup>6</sup> Youmans, Vincent and Heyman, Edward, "Drums In My Heart : from the Musical Play "Through The Years"" (1931). *Vocal Popular Sheet Music Collection*. Score 700.  
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mmb-vp-copyright/700>

<sup>7</sup> The Broadway League (c. 2001-2021) website. Source: Internet Broadway Database [Through the Years – Broadway Musical – Original | IBDB](#)

<sup>8</sup> Peterson, Carol Miles. *Bess Streeter Aldrich* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995, p. 115

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.musictory.com/music/Leo+Reisman/Drums+In+My+Heart>

Here are three 1941 reviews of the book, *The Drum Goes Dead* by Bess Streeter Aldrich.

<p>“Here is a story beautifully and poignantly written. It catches the spirit of Christmas in a small American town just as Dickens in his “Christmas Carol” catches the cheer of the holiday season in England.</p> <p>The story deals with the bank cashier of a small mid-western town before whose business window passed all the joys and sorrows, the pleasures and worries of the community. Here the depression still raised its haggard face, and whole world was in a state of unrest and war, and Richard Lanning, the cashier felt he would be a hypocrite to say “Merry Christmas” and sing “Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men” But this story by this Nebraska writer who shows that changes occurred that made Richard Lanning again feel the true spirit of Christmas, that is common to us all, and he became more hopeful and Christmasy.”<sup>10</sup></p>	<p>This year the palm for the best wartime Christmas story must be awarded to Bess Streeter Aldrich for her most beautiful and poignant tale of Richard Lanning, banker in a small mid-western town. On the day before Christmas, Lanning was depressed and even bitter, for the seeming unreality of the traditional celebrations and greetings looked and sounded to him like hypocrisy.</p> <p>Listening at the bank to customers’ recollections of other Christmasses prepared him for the revelation that flashed when against his will, he acted as Santa Claus at the community entertainment . Suddenly a bright-colored strand wove itself across the gray warp of his mind. In a faultlessly worded parable in terms of modern life, Mrs. Aldrich proclaims the truth that Christmas can never be blacked out.”<sup>11</sup></p>	<p>“Despite war, taxes, preparedness for defense, and the high cost of living, Christmas is coming.</p> <p>Perhaps you, as does Richard Lanning in “The Drum Goes Dead,” feel that there will be little spirit in this year for the brotherly love which manifests itself by the Christmas spirit. Maybe the mortgage does fall due and your income has been reduced, but if you continue to beat on the drum of your heart, an answering song will be your reward.</p> <p>Mrs. Aldrich is not sloppily sentimental; she clearly and with no false catch in her throat shows you the universal truth of the spirit of giving.</p> <p>The Lannings and their two children are a typical middle class family in a midwestern town. It’s the day before Christmas, but Richard Lanning doesn’t feel Christmasy. He is cashier of the bank and it is he who listens to the joys and sorrows and worries of the small community. His spirit is dead within him “and the death of the spirit is a grievous thing.”</p> <p>How his spirit is revived by a small gift, made precious by the trust and love it represents, is a theme Bess Streeter Aldrich is capable of handling without a trace of the Polyanna touch.” E.N.H.<sup>12</sup></p>
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- 1) Do you like one of the three reviews better than the others?
- 2) Do you think any of the reviews were more objective than the others?
- 3) What key event happened between November 1941 and December 1941? Did that affect anything?

<sup>10</sup> *Nebraska Daily News Press* (Nebraska City, NE) 21 December 1941 31 Page 1 “What’s New at the Library?”

<sup>11</sup> *Ottawa Citizen* (Ottawa Canada) 8 Nov 1941 “On the Book Table” by W.J. Hurlowe p. 18

<sup>12</sup> *The Cedar Rapids Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, IA) 9 Nov 1941 p. 3