

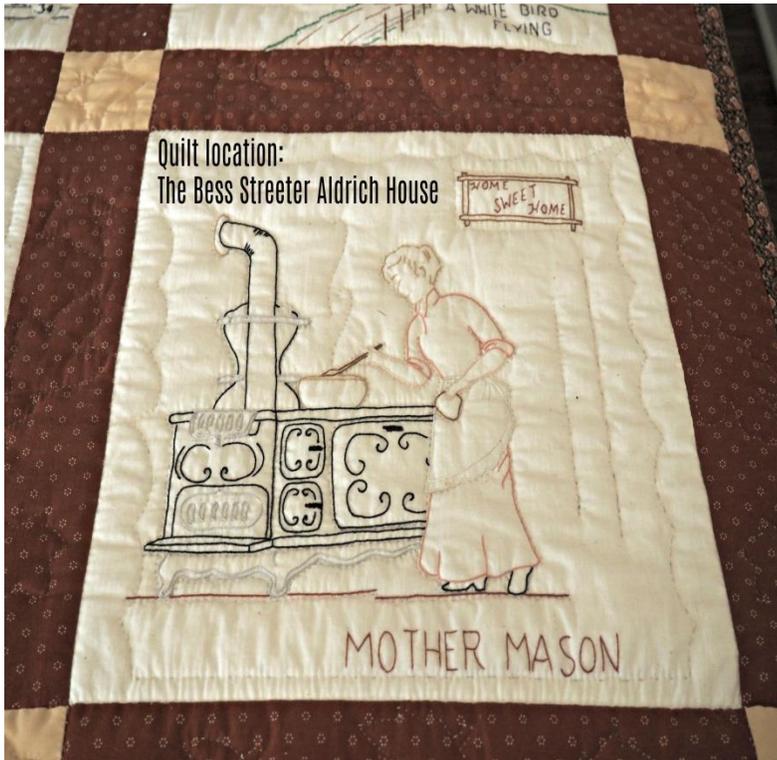
## Book Discussion Questions for *Mother Mason* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

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 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.

### About *Mother Mason*

This Aldrich title started out as a magazine serial. Transforming the ten stories into a book was not an easy process. First of all, a new chapter was written to tell readers about the Mason family. Previously she had introduced readers to the family in every published story, but that would have been cumbersome in the book. Although an editor contacted Aldrich about the possibility of this story compilation, none of his suggested publishers worked out. So ultimately Aldrich was the one who pitched the book to additional publishers. According to biographer Carol Miles Petersen, "she had first offered the Masons to a publisher in 1920, and, finally, it reached bookstores in 1924. None of her books would take so long; nor would she ever have to write another such (publisher) list."<sup>2</sup> For more information on this book, please contact [aldrichfoundation@gmail.com](mailto:aldrichfoundation@gmail.com)



Other items found in the *Mother Mason* book are on display in the "Mother Mason" room in the Southwest bedroom at the top of the stairs in the Bess Streeter Aldrich house.

***Mother Mason* Story Location:** Springtown – a country community; train ride away from Capital City

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

<sup>2</sup> Quoted from Bess Streeter Aldrich by Carol Miles Peterson (page 35)

## Mason Family Character Descriptions

Mother	
Henry	
Katherine	
Marcia	
Eleanor	
Junior	
Bob	
Mabel	
"Tillie" Horn	

### *Although Mother Mason is a book, really the stories play out chapter by chapter ...*

"Mother's Dash for Liberty"	Is there enough description in this story that one can picture who Mother is? Mother's name is rarely used. What does that tell us about her? Is this admirable or discouraging? How do we lose ourselves in our roles? Is individuality important?
"Introducing the Family"	Which character could you identify with the most? Did any characters rub you the wrong way? Should Mother have had more mention in this chapter?
"Katherine Entertains"	How does Katherine have a change of heart? Were either one of Professor Baldrige's actions surprising (specifically Keith's interactions with Grandpa and with Katherine)
"Tillie Cuts Loose"	Did Tillie's bout with freedom change her? What lessons did she learn? What lessons did Mother learn about Tillie?
"The Theatrical Sensation"	Eleanor has always been a tomboy. Will that change after her dramatic experience? Should her parents have been concerned about her?
"Proving Marcia to Have Been Born Lucky"	This chapter tells a lot about Marsha. Which words seem to typically describe her: careless, clueless or heartless? Do you think that Marsha's opportunities are a result of luck or something else?
"In Which Mother Renews Her Youth"	Do you think that Mother was glad that she went back to her college for a visit? Do you think the trip caused her to feel regret over her current situation or grateful for her life?
"Bob and Mabel Meet Tragedy"	Have you ever felt the weight of discontent that is prevalent in this chapter? Was Mother Mason's plan for action more helpful or hurtful in the long run? How do you gain perspective in your life?
"Junior Emulates Sir Galahad"	Do you think Junior was more apt to tell the story because of how he felt about the Thompsons? Junior seems to back and forth between lying and telling the truth. Could you tell which was which? Did Junior feel any remorse about spreading gossip?
"In Which Marcia Loses Her Job"	Other than the chapter full of introductions, this is the only chapter that was never published in a magazine. Why do you suppose this is? Why do you think Aldrich felt like this addition was necessary for the book?
"Father Retires"	Why do people retire at a certain age? Do most people enjoy retirement more or the idea of retirement more? What were the most compelling reasons that Father wanted to stay at the bank? Do you think he made the right decision? Why or why not?

## Facilitator Guide to *Mother Mason* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

### More insight into *Mother Mason* from Bess Streeter Aldrich herself:

I've been asked dozens of time if certain characters were from real life. People have insisted that every member of the Mason family was too real not to have been taken from among my friends, but that isn't so. To make a character appear real, take some human characteristics that you see, build a personality on that characteristic, and you have a real human character in a story."<sup>3</sup>

### Connecting to *Mother Mason*:

"Mother's Dash" had exciting repercussions. John Siddall (editor of *American Magazine* wrote to Aldrich that he had received a letter from a young soldier, a Private McNeill, stationed with the American Expeditionary Force in Europe, saying that the story had reminded so many of the men in his outfit of their own homes and mothers that they had worn out his copy of the *American Magazine*. The soldier asked if they could have more such stories."<sup>4</sup>

### Mason Family Character Descriptions - any quotations are directly from *Mother Mason*

Mother	Mrs. Henry Y. Mason; plump; 52 years old; from humble beginnings to a comfortable living; well-educated; fair, soft skin; laugh lines; partial false teeth; 25 years of parenting; Molly, her name, mentioned as an afterthought; overly committed to family and community affairs; called Mamma by Katherine
Henry	"Father"; 35 years at First National Bank of Springtown; considered country banker with multiple work roles, fan of farm sales. Parenting philosophy: "toward the children they presented a solid front." BUT "when they were alone, however, they argued it out."
Katherine	Eldest Mason daughter, "serious-eyed, lithe and lovely – and just graduated from the State University" ; she had high expectations for family's behavior; Katherine's nature was of a sweet seriousness and given to earnest study
Marcia	2nd child; year younger; had completed University junior year; "her studying was usually a hasty procedure"; Felt she "was born under a lucky star." "she was undeniably lovely" in appearance; selective on household chores; lots of friends; well-liked; quick to speak
Eleanor	16 years old "rather plain but she was merry hearted"; "smaller, twinkling eyes"; "her eyes seemed to laugh before their mirth communicated itself to her generous mouth"; athletic; cared little for fashion; tomboy – liked to play ball with the boys
Junior	eleven; leader for the dozen or so town boys; females (especially Katherine) helped with his upbringing; Father expected him to work at bank someday, so he emphasized arithmetic; did not get along with Marsha who always insisted that he wash his hands
Bob	Lived 2 blocks away; new baby girl, Betty, childhood sweethearts; stopped college to marry Mabel when her mother died; works in bank; quiet – keeps thoughts to himself
Mabel	Married to Bob; overwhelmed with trying to be a wife AND a mother and a housekeeper; had been "quiet little girl with thick, ashy-light hair and a sprinkle of freckles across the nose"; now a "demure lady"; "gentle-mannered"; "drollness"
(Matilda) "Tillie" Horn	Tillie "had lived in the Mason household for eighteen years." Family considered her an old friend rather than a servant. Tilly had stopped by once, noticed Mother needed help & stayed. "One of Tillie's forty odd characteristics was that she disliked to speak of her wages."

<sup>3</sup> Personal correspondence dated February 23, 1923, from Bess Streeter Aldrich to Hettie Bailey who had written asking Aldrich questions on behalf of her women's club. Letter was passed on to the Aldrich Foundation from Bailey's family.

<sup>4</sup> p. 30 in the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Peterson (c. 1995) – much of chapter three ("The Early 1920's: First Big Sales") talks about the impact of *Mother Mason*. Recommended reading for anyone who wants to learn more.

**All of the questions in the above discussion guide this time are really based on opinions. But below, you can find out a bit more about each of the stories.**

“Mother's Dash for Liberty”	Major character: Mother; appearances by all of the Masons Guest roles – only mentions of certain townspeople This story started the series -was first published in <i>American Magazine</i> , December 1918
“Introducing the Family”	No one is mentioned beyond the family and Tillie. This chapter is only found in the book. <b>Additional question:</b> do you think this chapter should have been first one?
“Katherine Entertains”	First published as “The Mason Family Now on Exhibition” in <i>American Magazine</i> , November 1919) <b>Additional question:</b> Which title suits the story better? <b>Featured characters:</b> Katherine; also Junior, Father, Mother, Tilly; <b>Guest characters:</b> Keith Baldrige, assistant professor of history; Grandpa Warner, local, reminiscing farmer
“Tillie Cuts Loose”	First published in <i>American Magazine</i> , April 1920). <b>Featured characters:</b> Tillie, Mother, others make an appearance <b>Guest character:</b> Mrs. Perkins <b>Additional questions:</b> Was Tillie weak for returning to the family? Was Mother weak for paying her still?
“The Theatrical Sensation”	First published as “The Theatrical Sensation of Springtown” in <i>American Magazine</i> , December 1919 <b>Major characters:</b> Eleanor; other Masons have minor role; <b>Guest characters:</b> Miss Genevieve Buckwalter – literature teacher & Shakespeare club advisor; Andrew Christensen: 19 “big, blond, good looking Romeo”; baseball boys
“Proving Marcia to Have Been Born Lucky”	First published as “Marcia Mason's Lucky Star” in <i>American Magazine</i> , May 1920 <b>Major characters:</b> Marsha; other Masons make an appearance in 2 <sup>nd</sup> half <b>Guest characters:</b> Mrs. Hastings (college doctor's wife); her brother, Mr. John R. Wheeler
“In Which Mother Renews Her Youth”	First published as “Mother's Excitement over Father's Old Sweetheart” in <i>American Magazine</i> , July 1919; <b>Additional question:</b> Which title expresses the true sentiment of the story? <b>Major characters:</b> Mother and Father; (children) <b>Guest characters:</b> Julie Todd, Miss Emeline Livingstone, Nettie Fisher, Myra Breckenridge; Laura Drew, Jim Baker;
“Bob and Mabel Meet Tragedy”	First published as “Mother Mason Gives Some Good Advice” in <i>American Magazine</i> , May 1920. <b>Additional questions:</b> Which title do you prefer? Is the book chapter title more of a mockery or meant to be humorous? Do you think that Mabel and Mother Mason’s relationship changed after this chapter’s events? <b>Major characters:</b> Bob, Mabel, Mother
“Junior Emulates Sir Galahad”	“Junior Emulates Sir Galahad” (first published as “Last Night, When You Kissed Blanche Thompson” in <i>American Magazine</i> , August 1920); <b>Featured Character:</b> Junior; other Masons appear; <b>Guest Characters:</b> Blanche Thompson, Frank Marston; townspeople <b>Additional Question:</b> a 12 year old’s version of a kiss is minor compared to romance scenes today. Did he overreact or would this have been scandalous?
“In Which Marcia Loses Her Job”	<b>Additional Questions:</b> As mentioned, this story was not included. Why do you think it was placed later in the book? Should a personal relationship affect employment? <b>Major Characters:</b> Marsha <b>Guest Characters:</b> Mr. Wheeler; Miss Hill (Herbie, Jim)
“Father Retires”	“Father Retires” (first published as “Father Mason Retires” in <i>American Magazine</i> , October 1920) <b>Major characters:</b> Father, Mother <b>Guest Characters:</b> Bank employees/ customers; potential buyers – Van Ordens & Coles
“Ginger Cookies”	No, you didn’t miss anything. Aldrich wanted this story to be about Junior Mason, but her <i>American Magazine</i> editor refused, claiming it did not fit the Mason family. So, she changed the boy to Georgie Billings instead & promptly sold it to <i>Ladies’ Home Journal</i> .