

Reading Group Questions and Topics for

Discussion -- THE MILL RIVER RECLUSE

- 1) *The Mill River Recluse* is not written in a single timeline, but instead uses alternating timelines that link near the end. What did you think of this structure? Was it effective in driving the story forward, or was it disorienting? Did you prefer one timeline over the other?
- 2) Of all the characters in *The Mill River Recluse*, with which one did you most identify, and why? If you could meet one of the characters for coffee, who would it be and why?
- 3) The opening scene of the book is of Mary McAllister taking her own life to avoid having to suffer further agonizing pain and certain eventual natural death resulting from her metastatic cancer. Do you think Father O'Brien knew Mary planned to take her own life when he left the marble mansion that last night? What do you think about Mary's decision to take things into her own hands? Did this scene give you pause?

- 4) How does Mary McAllister evolve from a shy teenager into a woman held prisoner by social anxiety and agoraphobia? Do you agree with the way in which Father O'Brien tried to help her? Would you have done anything differently had you been in his position?
- 5) Patrick McAllister is shockingly cruel, particularly toward the most vulnerable people and animals in his life. Do you think that Patrick became the person he did because of his parents and their relationship with him?
- 6) Unlike Patrick McAllister, Leroy Underwood had a very underprivileged upbringing. During Leroy's visit with Father O'Brien in the hospital, he sheds tears. Do you think his tears were a sign of remorse? Are he and Patrick McAllister different kinds of "bad people," or do you think their character defects are of a similar nature?
- 7) Despite his personal animosity toward Leroy, Father O'Brien visits him in the hospital to offer him support and comfort. Can you describe a time in your own life when you had to put aside your personal feelings to do something that you knew was right?

- 8) Of all the potions Daisy concocts, is there one that you believe you could drink if you had to? How would you react if Daisy showed up at your door peddling her wares?
- 9) Father O'Brien has been obsessed with spoons his entire life, but the reason for his attraction to those particular objects is never discussed or revealed. Do you have any theories as to why he is so drawn to spoons – so drawn, in fact, that he is willing to break his vows and steal them – as opposed to some other kind of item? Do you believe he has truly kicked his “spoon habit?”
- 10) Claudia Simon's struggle to eat healthy food is almost sabotaged by a box of Entenmann's powdered sugar donuts. Is there a food that you have trouble resisting?
- 11) Jean Wykowski struggles with middle age and a life that seems to have settled into a predictable routine. Instead of “borrowing” Mary's ring, what advice would you give her to add a little excitement and variety in her life?
- 12) Near the end of the novel, the people of Mill River learn that they have actually had a kind of relationship with Mary McAllister for years, and that Mary is a very different person than many of them had imagined her to be.

Are there other relationships in the novel in which one of the characters learns something new or unexpected about the other?

13) Which character in do you feel experiences the most personal growth throughout the course of the story, and why?

14) How did you feel upon finishing *The Mill River Recluse*? Did anything about the story or characters linger in your mind or change the way you view certain people or situations?