

The Season of Open Water

by Dawn Clifton Tripp

Random House

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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SUMMARY:

The Season of Open Water is at its core the story of nineteen year old Bridge Weld and her boat- building grandfather, Noel, who live and work in the southeastern coastal town of Westport, Ma. It is the fall of 1928. The stock market is about to crash and rum running is fast replacing fishing as the economic force in this out-of-the-way community whose coastline boasts many hidden inlets and protected coves.

With each chapter told from the perspective of a central character, the reader sees through the eyes of a remarkable range of the community inhabitants. First there is Bridge, whose life has bordered on the hardscrabble and who enters into a relationship with Henry, a handsome man who lives on the beach in a cottage literally and figuratively removed from her neighborhood and lifestyle. Henry has had a difficult coming of age of his own, as a doctor on the front lines in World War I. Luce, Bridge's brother, has been steadily close to his sister from childhood, but he is moving beyond that world as he adapts to life on the edge as a rum runner. Luce's relationship to his sister has always been unusually close and now threatens the relationship Bridge and Henry are developing. Bridge's grandfather Noel dreams of and is often haunted by his earlier whaling days. A master boat-builder whose craft is no longer in demand, Noel finds himself deconstructing that past as he guts boats to fit them out for the new economic forces of his community.

Supporting the cast of characters, indeed becoming a character itself, is the setting. Tripp paints a world of ocean, misty air, long winding roads, dark beaches, cold shores, and dangerous dunes that intertwine with and at times determine the paths of the novel's characters. The author paints an evocative landscape while exploring the interior lives in a community that is scrambling for footing in a world of shifting sands.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. A person's past and how they perceive it often affects their future. Noel looks back to an incident he experienced as a young whaler – the killing of a walrus pod. What are his feelings about it? How does his thinking inform the reader about his character? How does it influence the life of his family? What kind of person is Noel?

2. Bridge, a beautiful young woman who is fiercely loyal to her family and its personal struggles, experiences a coming of age in this novel. In life, our perceptions about family ties and obligations can affect our actions. Noel, Luce and Bridge each make profound choices that change their relationships. Discuss these choices and their effects.
3. Which relationship is primary in Bridge's life? How does this relationship compare with her other relationships? How would you describe Bridge?
4. Which are the most intriguing relationships in this novel and why? Which are the most difficult or promising?
5. The author uses the technique of telling the story from the shifting perspectives of Noel, Bridge, Henry, Cora and Luce. How well do we get to know each of them? What insights can the reader make about Cora, for example? She knows her children in ways that Noel can't. What does she know?
6. In this patriarchal family, Noel and Luce have a strong influence over Bridge. In what ways is Henry similar to and different from Noel and Luce?
7. Do you think Bridge is typical of young women her age? Is she compassionate or selfish; confident or fearful; happy or sad; giving or selfish?
8. Luce says, "It is dangerous . . . the way he loves her, when life, by nature is as swift and fleeting as a change in weather – clouds, fog, mist – passing through an empty sky." Discuss Luce's attachment to Bridge. Why might they be so close? Do they help or hinder one another?
9. In the author's hand, Westport takes on a character and an atmosphere of its own - dreamlike in some places and in others brutally real. How does the author achieve this? What are some of your favorite passages and why?
10. In the end, rum running or "mooncussing" proves to be at once a blessing and a scourge for the townspeople. How is this so? How might the future have been different for Bridge, Luce or Henry if they had made different choices?
11. What themes are played out in the novel? In one or two sentences, try to state the major theme. What passages in the novel support your theme?
12. What is "The Season of Open Water"? How is the violence in the opening scene of Noel's recollections metaphorical for Bridge, Luce and Henry?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Originally from Newton, Massachusetts, Dawn Clifton Tripp grew up spending summers in her grandmother's cottage at Westport Point in Westport, MA. She returned to live there full time after graduating from Harvard with an AB in literature. Ms. Tripp always knew that she wanted to write and spent time honing her craft in the years after college.

Southeastern Massachusetts, a fundamentally beautiful place and rich in history has little written about it by way of fiction. It seems Westport has been waiting for just such a writer to capture the essence of this lovely seacoast town and its inhabitants.

HELPFUL LINKS:

http://www.bakerbooks.net/ac_trippl.asp: Interview with Dawn Clifton Tripp about the writing of *The Season of Open Water*

<http://www.southcoasttoday.com/daily/06-05/06-21-05/b01li969.htm>: Newspaper interview with Dawn Clifton Tripp

<http://www.whalingmuseum.org>: New Bedford Whaling Museum

<http://Nps.gov/nebe/> : New Bedford Whaling National Historical Park

<http://www.westporthistory.com> : Westport Historical Society.

<http://www.coastalvillages.com> : a website which introduces the lovely towns along the southeastern coast of Massachusetts and Rhode Island.



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