

***Frozen River* by Ariel Lawhon**

Discussion questions from ReadingGroupGuides

- 1.** How did life in Hallowell in 1789 surprise you? Did the characters act as you expected for the historical period? What revelations were most interesting to you? How does our contemporary notion of the American dream apply to these characters?
- 2.** Throughout the novel, Martha is frequently called to deliver babies from women of all walks of life. Have you or anyone you know delivered a child with the assistance of a midwife? Which laboring mother did you feel most connected to?
- 3.** “Memory is a wicked thing that warps and twists. But paper and ink receive the truth without emotion, and they read it back without partiality.” (p 39) Martha’s diary is a critical component of the novel, and a key piece of evidence in Rebecca’s trial. Have you ever kept a diary? If not, did reading *THE FROZEN RIVER* influence you to start?
- 4.** Much of the novel’s action focuses on the legal process surrounding Rebecca Forster’s assault and Martha’s testimony. Were you surprised at the way the 18th-century judicial process unfolded? Do you think Rebecca’s story would have been received differently in a contemporary courtroom?
- 5.** The Ballards are an incredibly close-knit family. Did you have a favorite character among Martha and Ephraim’s brood? Was there a relationship between one of Martha’s children and their suitors that you were particularly cheering for?
- 6.** Experts are few and far between in Hallowell, making Martha and Doctor’s medical knowledge all the more important, and making Doctor Page’s poor advice especially dangerous. Would you have acted differently in Martha’s place to warn the townspeople about Page?
- 7.** Martha and her daughters spend much of the novel immersed in everyday household labor such as making candles, baking bread, weaving and killing chickens. Were there any 1780s tasks you’d be interested to try for yourself?
- 8.** What did you think of the way Martha and Ephraim’s past is revealed in the interstitial chapters? What did those glimpses of their earlier years reveal about them as the 1789 story unfolded? Which moments in their love story struck you most deeply?
- 9.** Martha says the townspeople dislike her. Ephraim disagrees: “They respect you. Perhaps occasionally fear you. It’s not the same thing.” (p 56) When is it better to be honest than it is to be well liked?
- 10.** Sally and Sarah are set up in opposition to each other throughout the novel, and Martha guesses incorrectly about both of their futures. Did you see those plot twists coming? Would you have acted differently toward either woman if you had been in Martha’s shoes?
- 11.** Martha’s final confrontation with North has lasting consequences for both of them. Do you think justice was done? What about in regards to Rebecca’s assault and Burgess’ killing? Would you have made the same choice as Martha?
- 12.** If *THE FROZEN RIVER* was adapted for film or television, who would you cast in the leading roles? Are there any components of the story you think would be especially striking to see acted out on screen?
- 13.** Did you read the author’s note? If so, did it change your evaluation of Martha’s life and the story of the “year of the long winter?”