

Discussion questions for *Rescue* by Anita Shreve

From the author's website

1. Rowan and Webster seem to have had a good relationship until recently. However, as a single father raising a daughter, Webster has doubts about how well he's done. What kinds of things might Rowan have missed out on, growing up without a mother? To what extent do you think this accounts for her recent behavior?

2. Sheila's daring and devil-may-care attitude is part of what attracts Webster to her, but early on he sees warning signs in her behavior. Is Webster foolish to get romantically involved with her nonetheless, or are attraction and love too strong to be checked by logic? Do you think he believes Sheila will change for him? And if so, is this a reasonable expectation to have of one's lover or spouse?

3. Burrows and Webster get an emergency call from a teenager and her mother, but the situation turns out to be very different from what it seems, with disastrous consequences (49). Do you think they were at fault for the judgment call they made? What would you have done in that situation?

4. When Sheila goes to AA, Webster believes their problems are over: "Now life would be different. He was sure of it" (130). But Sheila soon relapses. Why do you think the program doesn't work for her at this point? Is any part of her effort sincere, or is she just trying to appease Webster?

5. Webster, Rowan, and Sheila share a picnic breakfast in the woods, but it soon becomes clear that their moods during this outing are very different (134). What does this scene convey about how Sheila and Webster view their relationship, parenthood, and their family? Why might their views be so far apart?

6. Sheila tells Webster, "You were my best shot [at] safety. You exude safety" (118). Why is Webster so insulted by this statement? What do you think Sheila means by it?

7. As Rowan starts to act out, Webster uses different strategies: confronting her, ignoring the behavior, even seeking help from an unlikely source. But none of these have the desired effect. How might he have coped differently? Or do you think nothing he could have done would have worked?

8. Why does Sheila react the way she does when Webster first comes to see her? Did you expect her to behave differently? What might she have wanted to say to Webster that she held herself back from saying?

9. Initially, Webster chooses not to tell Rowan the whole story about how Sheila left. Why do you think he withholds "one important fact" (186)? Is he right to do so? Would have changed Rowan's outlook if he had told her the truth from the outset?

10. Sheila and Webster blame themselves and each other for Sheila's departure. Do they share the blame equally or is one of them more responsible than the other? Is Sheila at fault because she acted recklessly? Should Webster have tried harder to find a solution that kept their family intact?

11. Sheila has missed many years of Rowan's life. To what extent do you think true reconciliation between Rowan and Sheila is possible? Is the role of "mother" something irrevocable or, as Webster says, do you "have to earn the title of mother" (222)?

12. The first time Rowan and Sheila meet again, Webster observes that there is "No mention yet of abandonment or guilt. Anger or remorse. That will come..."(274). If you were Rowan, what would you want to say to Sheila? And in Sheila's place, what would you want to tell Rowan?

13. How does the theme of "rescue" play out in the novel? Is it possible to rescue another person, even when they refuse help? Do we have a responsibility to try to rescue our loved ones? If so, is there a limit to that responsibility?

14. Imagine the characters' lives a year after the end of the novel. What do you think the shape of this family will be?