

***Still Life* by Louise Penny**

Discussion questions from the publisher

1. At the beginning of *Still Life*, we are told that “violent death still surprised” Chief Inspector Armand Gamache. Why is that odd for a homicide detective, and how does it influence his work? What are his strengths and his weaknesses?
2. The village of Three Pines is not on any map, and when Gamache and Agent Nicole first arrive there, they see “the inevitable paradox. An old stone mill sat beside a pond, the mid-morning sun warming its fieldstones. Around it the maples and birches and wild cherry trees held their fragile leaves, like thousands of happy hands waving to them on arrival. And police cars. The snakes in Eden.” Can you find other echoes of Paradise in Three Pines, and what role do snakes—real or metaphorical—play there?
3. There are three main couples in the book: Clara and Peter, Olivier and Gabri, and Gamache and Reine-Marie. How would you characterize each of these relationships?
4. Gamache says “I’ve never met anyone uniformly kind and good,” yet no one has anything bad to say about Jane—except regarding her art. What is your impression of that art? How do you understand the game Jane used to play with Yolande and the Queen of Hearts?
5. When the charred arrowhead is found in his home, it is said that Matthew Croft “had finally been hurt beyond poetry.” How does poetry help him and other characters in this novel? Does it ever have the power to hurt? What do you think of Timmer Hadley’s idea that “there’s something about Ruth Zardo, something bitter, that resents happiness in others, and needs to ruin it. That’s probably what makes her a great poet, she knows what it is to suffer.”
6. Consider Gamache’s advice to Nichol: “Life is choice. All day, every day. Who we talk to, where we sit, what we say, how we say it. And our lives become defined by our choices. It’s as simple and as complex as that. And as powerful.” Similarly, Myrna stopped practicing psychology because she lost patience with people who lead “still” lives, “waiting for someone to save them....The fault lies with us, and only us. It’s not fate, not genetics, not bad luck, and it’s definitely not Mom and Dad. Ultimately it’s us and our choices.” How do their choices affect the principal characters in the novel? Do any of their choices remind you of ones you have made in your own life?
7. There’s a huge clue to the murder early in the book, when Jane gives Ben a meaningful look and then quotes from W. H. Auden: “Evil is unspectacular and always human, and shares our bed and eats at our own table.” Why is it so easy to overlook that clue at the time, and what impact does it have when it’s quoted again in the last chapter?
8. Who do you think Gamache has in mind when he tells Gabri and Olivier: “You’re not the types to do murder. I wish I could say the same for everyone here.”
9. Clara has “very specific tastes” in murder mysteries: “Most of them were British and all were of the village cozy variety.” Do you see *Still Life* as a typical “cozy”? Why or why not?