

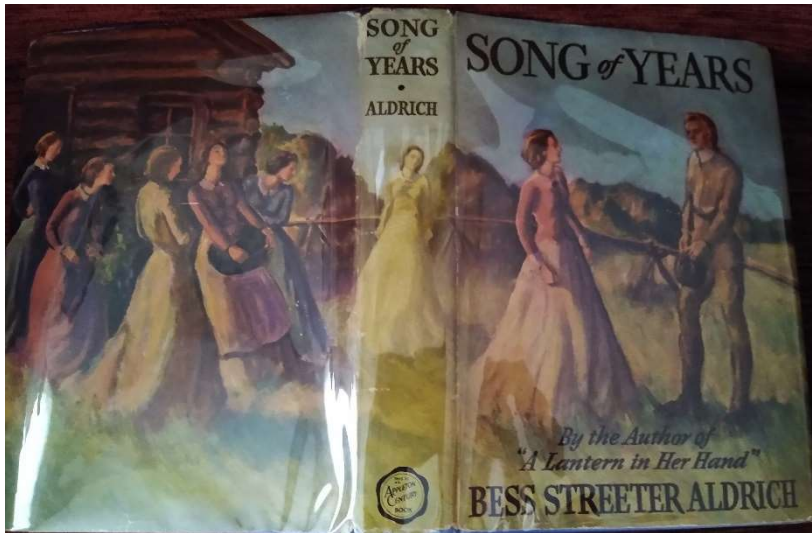
Book Discussion Questions for *Song of Years* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

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About the author: Bess Streeter Aldrich was born on February 17th, 1881, in Cedar Falls, Iowa. She was the 8th child of James Wareham Streeter and Mary Wilson Anderson Streeter. Her Grandpa Zimri Streeter and his family were actually early settlers in Black Hawk County. This book, *A Song of Years*, is partially based on the Streeter family experiences. As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her 1901 degree from Iowa State Normal School in Cedar Falls, then she taught for several years. During this time, she met Cap (Charles) Aldrich. They were married on September 24, 1907. In 1909, their daughter was born. Soon after, they moved to Elmwood, Nebraska, to run the American Exchange Bank in Elmwood with Bess' sister and brother-in-law. By 1920, the Aldrich family also included three sons. During these years, Bess wrote and published many short stories in magazines. When her husband died in 1925, Bess' hobby became necessary for her family's livelihood. Over time, Bess wrote nine novels. Additional stories were combined into compilations. Bess died on August 3rd, 1954. In 1972, she was named to the "Nebraska Hall of Fame," so she is now a part of the display of notable people at the Nebraska Capitol.

About *Song of Years*



This is the original dust jacket cover that was illustrated by Bess's son, James Aldrich that is on display at the Aldrich Museum. For more information on this book, please contact aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

"During a 1930 visit to Cedar Falls, Aldrich had chatted with seventy-year-old banker Roger Leavitt, whose family, like her own, were early settlers of the region." Soon after, Leavitt wrote her to suggest that "she write a novel based on historically correct accounts of early Iowa history." In 1937, her publisher pushed for another pioneer book. She contacted Leavitt and asked him to share his collected materials. Less than a week later, "two letters and an eighteen-pound box of pages, loose leaves from his seventy scrapbooks arrived."¹ This information, along with personal stories from her family, provided the book's inspiration.

***Song of Years* Basic Plot:** Primarily focusing on Wayne Lockwood & the Martin family, this is the story of the early settlement of Black Hawk County, Iowa starting in 1854 until the end of the Civil War in 1865.

***Song of Years* Primary Characters (see the Facilitator's Guide for additional characters & details)**

The Martins: Jeremiah and Sarah; Sabina; Phoebe Lou; Jeanie; Emily; Melinda; Celia; Suzanne;			
Henry & Phineas (only Martin boys)	Wayne Lockwood	Cady Bedson	Tom Bostwick
Ed Armitage	Ambrose Willshire	Brothers Alf and Rand Banning	Horace Akin

¹ *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Petersen, p. 157 (All quotes from "About Song of Years")

***Song of Years* covers over a decade of time and contains multiple storylines. To discuss the book adequately, several book club sessions are recommended. That might not be possible for every group. Teachers – this book would be a wonderful historical fiction read-aloud since words could be edited.**

If a book club is only meeting once, here are some general questions. Please consider using some of the additional provided supplemental materials to round out your group's discussion.

What do you think are the themes of *Song of Years*?

This book is told from multiple perspectives. Which voice resonated with you the most?

Which one of the Martin family members was your favorite? Why?

Were there any characters that you did not like?

This book covers the middle of the 1800s. What part of the historical section interested you?

A Song of Years contains segments of multiple "love" stories and weddings. Which one could you identify with? Would any of the stories have changed if they happened today?

How did the motto "pull yourselves on through" play out in the lives of the Martins and the settlers?

What was your favorite part of *Song of Years*? Are there any parts of the books you would eliminate?

Introduction and Wayne Lockwood's Arrival to Iowa 1854 (Chapters 1-3)

-Does starting the book at a cemetery draw you into the story?

-Wayne noted that his land must have water and timber. What else would factor into determining where to set up a house on the prairie?

-Wayne's rush for land is based on a true story. Would you been willing to try that hard?

-Cady's first meeting with Wade was noteworthy. Did you anticipate their later interactions?

-Chapter 3 ends with notating "and thus did the curtain go up on the little play which was to contain all the elements of every life's drama: work, play, joy, sorrow, disappointment, achievement, love, hate. Is there anything you would add to this list?"

The Neighbors and Getting Settled 1854 (Chapters 4-10)

-What did Wayne think when he met the Martin family?

-The Martin cabin plays a part in the story. What is notable about the house?

-To avoid a rumored Indian attack, the settlers shelter together. Which reaction can you identify with?

-The arrival of "the box" plays a part in several chapters. Why did it matter so much?

-Why did they all quiet down to hear the first school bell? What did it symbolize?

The Town Seat, Christmas, Weddings and the Representative (Chapters 11-18)

-What happened when Prairie Rapids men tried to take the court records from the town of Sturgis?

-What preparations were done for Sabina's wedding?

-Suzanne is recognized as an idealist. How does this impact her as her family members start leaving?

-How do their Christmas celebrations change through the years?

-How was Henry's wedding different? Do you think he was disappointed with their efforts?

- What struggles did the settlers face in chapter 15? Which one would have impacted you the most?
- Croup is still around today, but how did they treat it during pioneer days? Would this work today?
- In chapter 17, three events happened in 1857 that impacted the Martins. Did any of them surprise you?
- When Jeremiah heads off to Des Moines as a representative, what type of send off does he receive?

The Legislature, Slavery, Abraham Lincoln (Chapters 19-24)

- When Pa returns months later, he is greeted with a party. What did the Legislature accomplish?
- How did death enter the community in chapter 20? What did they do to remember?
- How did the family feel about slavery? What impacted their views?
- When the Scotts moved to the area, this stirred up controversy. Why?
- What did the community think when Abraham Lincoln was nominated to run for President?
- Why was Phoebe Lou's wedding so rushed? How did it impact the family?

Carlie, the Seminary, the President, the War Begins (Chapters 25-33)

- Suzanne dreams of Wayne professing his love to her. What does he do instead? How does she respond?
- Why does Suzanne note that "You can never buy a man's loves, nor even his passing interest."
- How was attending college or the seminary different for students back then?
- “I thought.. you'd like to know your Pa's elected Abraham Lincoln president.” How is this true?
- In 28, the Banningers join the story. What do you think of the brother's rivalry? Do they love the sisters? What imagery strikes you the most when the men leave to fight in the War?
- What happens to the town men with Confederate leanings? Do you think situations like this happened?
- What situation showed that Wayne Lockwood was starting to recognize Suzanne?
- How does the Banninger family competition continue?
- Plot Twist! Did you suspect that Carlie did not really care for Wayne Lockwood like everyone presumed?
- How is the statement proven wrong, "The prairie can't go back on me like this?" Has winter changed?
- Were you surprised by Wayne's thoughts when he helped Suzanne? Would she have been surprised?
- Are Phoebe Lou's sisters sympathetic when she loses her husband? How does Sarah resolve Ed's life?
- Several of the characters interpret the "song of years" differently. Which one do you identify with?

-Wayne's War, Life at Home, The Final Wedding (Chapters 34-47)

- Wayne and the Reserves are leaving for War. When he says good-bye to the Martins, how did they all react? Suzanne wonders the next day "how it would be if Wayne cared for her." How did it change?
- Why is the 1863 4th of July significant? How does it intertwine with Vicksburg?
- Phineas returns home injured. What caused him to break down? How did his life change?
- When the Banninger brothers return from war, why is Suzanne concerned?
- But God was not to be bargained with, not to be cajoled into favoring Suzanne Marin on the river road above other praying women. Lockwood, Wayne, wounded, died." Can we bargain with God?

- When Cady asks Suzanne to marry him, her response is, "I supposed I could if you want me to." Would you have proceeded if you were the recipient of such a response? Why does Cady want to marry her?
- How does Phoebe Lou give Suzanne a bit of hope in her situation?
- What honor was Jeremiah given? Why would a man risk his life to bring back the soldiers' ballots?
- Pa almost misses his "welcome back" party. Did any of his descriptions of the War startle you?
- Did Pa telling Suzanne that Wayne was still alive make her situation harder or easier? Do you think Suzanne's reaction influenced Pa to tell her to stick with her "word of Honor?" Do you agree?
- How did they celebrate the end of the War? What comment had a foreboding tone?
- The family is all affected when Lincoln is shot. Who surprises everyone with a speech?
- Jeanie and Ambrose seem to have a complicated relationship. What are some examples of this?
- Much to Ma's disappointment, Sabina is going to host Suzanne's wedding in her new house. The family arrives. Are they all the same or different? Who notices that Suzanne is sad? Who finally rescues her?
- As Wayne is heading home from War, he reflects on his life. He thinks Suzanne has moved on, but he is sad because "she feels like home to him." How does he find out that the wedding has not happened?
- Was the ending love story satisfying to you, or did you hope for a different outcome?
- The book ends in the same way it began – at the cemetery. Do you appreciate the location more now that you have come to know the characters? Why did the author include descriptions of loved items?

At around four hundred pages, Mrs. Aldrich's book *Song of Years* contains so much about Iowa history, the Union side of the Civil War as well as stories about pioneer living. Readers may still benefit from going through the general question answers even if they are unable to discuss the book with others.

Many of the answers to the overall questions will vary, but here are some potential ones.

Potential Song of Years themes: Fortitude, love, family, perseverance, bravery, selfishness, unselfishness, kindness, patriotism, frugality, ingenuity. The main cast of characters list helps readers remember which voices are the most enjoyable and which characters were admirable.

Were there any unlikeable characters? A few possibilities: Ed Armitage, Ambrose Wilshire, Carlie Scott.

Interesting history: Some may enjoy reading about Iowa statehood. For others, reading actual historical Civil war details is exciting. For the romantic at heart, love stories about throughout the book.

The Song of Years "love" stories might have changed if they happened today. War sped up two of the weddings. That might not have happened today. Married settlers could hang on to the land due to the amount of work that was needed. Widows and widowers often remarried to help families survive.

How did the motto "pull yourselves on through" play out in the lives of the Martins and the settlers? Jeremiah details it out. "No matter what you get stuck in ... mud, swamps, gumbo, snow, jobs, difficulties, disappointments, hurts ... any hard place or thing in life" He encouraged them to "do your own thinkin' ... your own decidin'" then "do your own pullin." The settlers faced numerous difficulties such as drought and storms that they had to push forward through as no one would rescue them. They managed to get by with food and with made-over clothes.

-At the end of Chapter 33, several of the characters interpret the "song of years" differently. Which one do you identify with? See the book guide page containing song lyrics and characters' identifications..

-Any parts of Song of Years that didn't resonate with you? How about a favorite part of the book?