

Book Discussion Questions for *A White Bird Flying* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen M. 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 closest sibling was ten years older, so she described herself as having the "world's record for the number of bosses over her."¹ As a young adult, Bess began entering story contests and even won several. She received her degree from Iowa State Normal School in 1901, 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 would find snatches of time to write. She published many short stories in magazines and some of her serials became books. 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" and is now a part of the display at the Nebraska Capitol.

The Publication of *A White Bird Flying*: "In January 1930, Jewett (*her editor*) was still pushing Aldrich to write to him and relate 'what you can about the next novel.'" She was at last able to answer with the idea she had been mentally stirring about. Aldrich suggested that perhaps the public might want to know more about the Deals, their continuing lives, and their roles in the rural community. She sent Jewett some preliminary pages in which a young girl was the main character. He agreed that the public remained interested in the family, but he was not enthusiastic. He warned that modern agriculture was not as popular as pioneering and again stressed the importance he perceived of using, as a thread running through the work, the philosophy of an old man."² His working title for her book was *Old Man of the Prairie*. Mrs. Aldrich ended up writing Laura Deal as the main character, but pioneer Oscar Lutz from *Lantern* also played an important role.



This *A White Bird Flying* pillow can be seen in the *A Lantern in Her Hand* bedroom at the Bess Streeter Aldrich house. To take a tour, the website tells when the house is open. <https://www.bessstreeteraldrich.org/>

After Publication: "*A White Bird Flying* was in bookstores by early August 1931, and only two weeks after publication it reached best-seller lists. The book's acceptance proved that Aldrich was correct in believing that the public was still interested in the Deal family. Sales were also rewarding to Aldrich emotionally, for they proved to her that she was not written-out as had feared, and gave her confidence that that new commissions would relieve some of her worries about money."³

¹ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 11)

² Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Petersen (page 106)

³ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich* biography by Carol Miles Petersen (page 113)

A White Bird Flying Characters

This book is a sequel to <i>A Lantern in Her Hand</i> . Abbie Mackenzie Deal passed away at the end of that book. This book starts there. She and her husband, Will Deal, had five surviving children together.	
1. Mackenzie: Marries Emma Lutz; Children: Donald, Stanley and Katherine; At the end of <i>Lantern</i> , Kathie marries Jimmie Buchanan – they have a daughter named, Patty	
2. Margaret	Marries Frederick Hamilton Baker; son: Fred Baker Jr. (marries & has son later)
3. John	Marries Eloise Wentworth; Children: Wentworth, Laura (Lolly) and Millard (Trib)
5. Isabelle	Marries Harrison Scannell Rhodes; both are musicians; no children;
6. Grace	Never marries or has any children; Professor
Painting	Abbie's Grandmother Isabelle Anders Mackenzie is remembered at Kathie's house
Oscar Lutz	1 of 2 surviving original neighbors; winters in California; shares lots of stories
Wentworths	Eloise's relatives – Uncle Harry and Aunt Caroline
Allen Rinemiller	Grandson of original settlers, Gus and Christine Reinmueller; spelling of last name changed to reflect the times; University student; plans to farm again in Cedartown
Christine	Allen's Grandmother who now lives in a nursing home in Lincoln
Alpha Beta	Girls: Bernice Fowler

A White Bird Flying Questions

Do you think a person should read *A Lantern in Her Hand* first? How might that make a difference?

Do you think it was important to start this book right after Abbie Deal's death? This book then skips several years. Do you wish more years were covered?

If you are from Nebraska, what stereotypes have you heard about your state? If you are not from Nebraska, what do you think of the state? Do you think opinions have changed over the past 100 years?

"Old Oscar Lutz was Cedartown's last old man of the prairie." He likes to tell stories about his early pioneering days in the state. Did you enjoy his recollections, or did you find them to be tedious?

The next generation of Reinmuellers change the spelling of their name to Rinemiller. Do you think this happened in real life? Do you think this honored the family heritage?

This book tackles the transitioning of roles that was happening back in the 1920's: gender roles, parenting roles, even agricultural roles. Did any of these defining scenes impact you?

Part of this book was devoted to college life. Laura's mother really wanted her to be a part of the Greek system. Is this still an important part of upper-level education?

Eloise felt that her uncle had achieved great things because of his money. Later she begged him to create opportunities for her daughter. Was this move manipulative or resourceful?

Did the death of Oscar Lutz provide part of the climax of the book? What about the tree symbolism?

Laura initially said "no" to Allen's proposal. Did you agree with that decision? Are you glad that she changed her mind?