

Book Discussion Questions for *A Lantern in Her Hand* 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.

Inspiration Behind a Lantern in Her Hand: "When a statue 'Pioneer Mother' was dedicated in Oklahoma, Bess expressed the wish that someday she could create a monument to the pioneer mother 'not in marble, but through the only medium I could use- the written word.' For Bess, it seemed false to depict the prairie women as gaunt, beaten, quietly going mad with despair. In her rich memories of her Iowa people was the conviction that with their faith and humor 'if they had gone mad, it would have never have been quietly.' The pioneer mother story had been in her mind for many years as she had published three other novels. She wanted her story to face up to the truths of the early pioneer days. She wanted to include the intangibles of spirit that made her own mother say when sympathy for past hardships was offered, "Save your pity, we had the best time in the world."² Many editions of the book contain "The Story Behind a Lantern in Her Hand."

Mrs. Aldrich's explanations about the book can also be read at:

<https://history.nebraska.gov/sites/history.nebraska.gov/files/doc/publications/NH1975AldrichLantern.pdf>



At the Bess Streeter Aldrich House in Elmwood, Nebraska, one of the upstairs bedrooms is decorated in honor of *A Lantern in Her Hand*. Many things on display directly represent items mentioned in this book including this instrument. An organ, similar to this one, plays an important part of the storyline. To take a tour of the house, please check out the current hours at: <https://www.bessstreeteraldrich.org/>

A complimentary *Lantern* novel unit is available for educators upon request. Please visit the website for more information or send an email to aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

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

² Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 20)

A Lantern in Her Hand Mackenzie and Deal Family Characters

Family - Abbie Mackenzie	Grandmother Isabelle Anders Mackenzie; Parents: Basil & Margaret "Maggie" (O'Conner) Brothers: James, Dennis, Basil Sisters: Mary, Isabelle, Janet (Tom Graves)
Will Deal's Family	Will's Parents: Grandpa and Grandma Deal; Sisters: Regina; Louisa Note: Will had additional siblings and extended family but not mentioned by name
Will and Abbie married and had five surviving children and one stillborn son, Basil (4 th child)	
1. Mackenzie	Banker; Marries Emma Lutz; Children: Donald, Stanley & Katherine (marries Jimmy)
2. Margaret	Marries Dr. Frederick Hamilton Baker; son: Fred Baker Jr. (marries & has son later)
3. John	Lawyer; Marries Eloise Wentworth; Children: Wentworth, Laura and Millard
5. Isabelle	Musician; Marries Harrison Scannell Rhodes; both are musicians; no children
6. Grace	University Professor; Never marries or has any children

A Lantern in Her Hand Neighbors

Oscar Lutz	Has a wife (Martha) and three small children
Henry Lutz	Young bride, Sarah, and nephew, Dan; later Emma
Grandpa Lutz	"mild-mannered, gentle old man"; the Lutz family all came from Michigan
Gus Reinmueller	His "voman, Christine"; 2 kids at first; later a total of 4 boys and 2 girls
Townspople	Rev. Samuel Mowery & wife; Dr. Hornby; Asy Smith (handyman)

A Lantern in Her Hand Discussion Questions

- 1) What dreams does Abbie have when she is young?
- 2) What childhood memories of Abbie's are significant?
- 3) What happens to change Will and Abbie's relationship from childhood friends to sweethearts?
- 4) Who is Ed Matthews? How does he impact the book?
- 5) How does becoming a mother change Abbie?
- 6) Do you think Abbie wanted to move away from Iowa and from her family?
- 7) What would be the hardest part about starting over on the prairie?
- 8) These pioneers face challenging circumstances including drought, grasshoppers and fire. Which one would be most challenging?
- 9) When celebrating Christmas on the prairie, Will and Abbie had to be innovative. Which gift was most significant? Have you ever had to be creative in your gift giving due to a lack of resources?
- 10) Three significant deaths take place during their first decade on the prairie. Which one impacted you the most?
- 11) How do the Deals and their neighbors change over time?
- 12) How does life change for the Deals once the kids grow up and start moving on?
- 13) How does Abbie almost die? Who saves her life? How does John almost die? After these near death experiences, was Will's unexpected death surprising? How does Abbie handle it? How does this mirror Mrs. the life of Mrs. Aldrich?
- 14) When Grandma Deal moves in, how does Abbie treat her? Could you have acted the same way?
- 15) How is Abbie different from her grandchildren?
- 16) How does the painting of Grandmother Isabelle Anders Mackenzie reappear again? How does Abbie react?
- 17) What happens during the final Deal gathering?
- 18) What significant events happen in the world over the course of Abbie's life?
- 19) How do Abbie's dreams come true?
- 20) What does Abbie think about during the final chapter of her life?