

Book Discussion Questions for *The Cutters* by Bess Streeter Aldrich

Presented by Gretchen Garrison of "Odyssey Through Nebraska"

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.



Mrs. Aldrich preferred to write out her manuscripts. To get her manuscripts ready for publishing, she hired local girls to type her stories. This is an example of the kind of typewriter that would have fit inside her desk and is on display in the front room at the Bess Streeter Aldrich House in Elmwood.

About *The Cutters*

Like *Mother Mason*, this Aldrich title started out as a magazine serial. While *Mother Mason* focused on a family with young adult children, the *Cutters* have younger children ages twelve, seven, nine and a baby. Biographer Carol Miles Petersen notes there was another significant difference between the two books. "While these Cutter stories remained basically as they first appeared, Aldrich rewrote the beginnings of most of them to provide transitions. The rewriting provided great continuity, as in a novel, rather than individual stories loosely joined as the *Masons* had been."² The Cutter family reflected the Aldriches as the oldest is a girl followed by three boys. According to the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook*, "Josephine, the teenage daughter, was patterned after Mary Eleanor Aldrich."³ *The Cutters* celebrates family and small town with optimistic sentimentality. For more information on this book, please contact aldrichfoundation@gmail.com

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

² Quoted from *Bess Streeter Aldrich* by Carol Miles Peterson (page 71)

³ Quoted from the *Bess Streeter Aldrich Scrapbook* by Vopal Gowman Youngberg (page 19)

The Cutters Story Location: the Meadows, a Midwestern town; **Cutters Family Character Descriptions**

Ed	Father, attorney, generous with his time and resources; loving to his family
Nell	Mother; busy, often wants what she doesn't have, hard-working, takes care of her family
Josephine	Age 12; "too old to be cunning and too young to be cute" "intricate labyrinth of emotions"5
Craig	Age 9; dreamer, acted only on his own ideas (5); accurate with details; with Nicholas often
Nicholas	Age 7; "quick, impulsive, a live wire" (5)
Leonard	Baby; very minor character until the last chapter
Gramma	Ed's Mother; raised 8 kids; twice a pioneer; farmer's wife; looks to the past for wisdom
Opal Peterson	"So often in a small town your maid is no servant at all, but a real neighborly human being." (Ch. 1)

All of the chapters were short stories at one time, so they can be read chapter by chapter.

"Guests"	1) What did the family do to present the best version of their household to the guests? 2) Does your opinion of the guests change during the chapter? What about the family? 3) Should the Cutters have persuaded Josephine to experience time at the Keplars?
"Reversion to Type"	1) Did Nell have unrealistic expectations of her children? Is it okay to expect a certain standard? 2) Whose parenting advice is more realistic – Mrs. Johnson Peabody-Mills or Gramma's? 3) Does this chapter help you recall any of your own parenting moments?
"The White Elephant Sale"	1) Nell appreciated Mrs. Ramsey's simplicity. How does the rest of the family feel? 2) What type of drastic methods does Mrs. Ramsey insist that Nell follow? 3) What type of person is Mrs. Ramsey 4) Have you ever regretted donating anything?
"The Family Takes a Vacation"	1) Has your family ever taken separate trips where everyone goes a different direction? 2) Does Nell's visit with Sylvia sound like something that you would enjoy? 3) Do you have an active imagination regarding family safety like Nell? 4) Which family member do you think struggled most during their time apart? Who enjoyed the time the most?
"Josephine Encounters a Siren"	1) Do you think the definition of "siren" has changed over the last 100 years? 2) Have you ever chosen one friend over another? Do you regret that choice? 3) Have you ever suffered betrayal by a friend? How did you recover?
"The Nicest House in Town"	1) Are you living in your dream house? Is it possible to have everything you want in a house? 2) How have home decorating networks impacted the housing market? 3) Why do you think Nell's family was able to be content while she struggled?
"The Homecoming"	1) After eagerly anticipating her children visiting, why was Gramma so disappointed? 2) Did her sons have the correct perspective of their childhood? How was it different than Gramma's views? 3) Did Gramma's recollections help or hurt the conversations? Why?
"Meadows Entertains a Celebrity"	1) Why was picking a location for the gathering so problematic? Are these concerns common everywhere or only in small towns? 2) Have you ever gone overboard with too much effort? 3) What truths shared at the end were important reminders?
"Easy Money"	1) Have you ever tried a side business? 2) Have you ever been stuck with items (like the furniture polish) because of a contest? 3) Do you think the company gave out the prize?
"The Present Generation"	1) Barbara enters the book rather blustery. Do you like her character? 2) Did she help to expand the Cutters' thinking? 3) Did you predict what was really happening?
"The Children Grow Up"	1) Do you agree with this last page quote, "I'd tell mothers ... that their very happiest time is when the children are all little and making them the most work?" 2) Can parents live balanced during the busyness? 3) Was this chapter a satisfying end to the book?