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## Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

### **Evidence of Things Unseen** by Marianne Wiggins

#### Summary

This poetic novel, by the acclaimed author of *John Dollar*, describes America at the brink of the Atomic Age. In the years between the two world wars, the future held more promise than peril, but there was evidence of things unseen that would transfigure our unquestioned trust in a safe future.

Fos has returned to Tennessee from the trenches of France. Intrigued with electricity, bioluminescence, and especially x-rays, he believes in science and the future of technology. On a trip to the Outer Banks to study the Perseid meteor shower, he falls in love with Opal, whose father is a glassblower who can spin color out of light.

Fos brings his new wife back to Knoxville where he runs a photography studio with his former Army buddy, Flash. A witty rogue and a staunch disbeliever in Prohibition, Flash brings tragedy to the couple when his appetite for pleasure runs up against both the law and the Ku Klux Klan. Fos and Opal are forced to move to Opal's mother's farm on the Clinch River, and soon they have a son, Lightfoot. But when the New Deal claims their farm for the TVA, Fos seeks work at the Oak Ridge Laboratory—Site X in the government's race to build the bomb.

And it is there, when Opal falls ill with radiation poisoning, that Fos's great faith in science deserts him. Their lives have traveled with touching inevitability from their innocence and fascination with "things that glow" to the new world of manmade suns.

Hypnotic and powerful, *Evidence of Things Unseen* constructs a heartbreaking arc through twentieth-century American life and belief.

#### Discussion Questions

1. To what does the title refer? Does it have more than one meaning? From what source did Wiggins choose it?
2. What experience in your own life does the title speak to? What in your life gives you evidence of things unseen?

3. How does war in *Evidence of Things Unseen* shape the character's lives and how are we shaped by war now? What do you think Ray and Opal would have done if they had not met?
4. If Fos "were more like Flash, more cynical about the fundamental nature of mankind," might the events in Fos' life have taken a different turn?
5. Ray and Opal seemed to be bonded together as one. They don't even communicate at certain times but yet they are connected to each other's feelings and thoughts. Is this unique to the characters or do couples/or close people really become that in tune with each other?
6. Would Fos have committed suicide if he could have foreseen the effect it would have on Lightfoot's life, or was his love for Opal too overwhelming?
7. Is Flash ultimately redeemed by the events that occur near the end of the novel? We find that he had overstayed his sentence in prison, citing his brother's unwillingness to hear his application for parole. How much of Flash's punishment is self-inflicted? Why did Opal seem to forgive him when he had so clearly not forgiven himself? Is he in fact making another prison for himself when he buys the derelict boat, or has he freed himself by guiding Lightfoot toward his future?
8. "In what ways, if any, do you think Lightfoot's life would have changed if he found out that Opal and Fos were not his real parents?"

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher.