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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

Patron Saint of Liars by Ann Patchett

Summary

St. Elizabeth's is a home for unwed mothers in the 1960s. Life there is not unpleasant, and for most, it is temporary. Not so for Rose, a beautiful, mysterious woman who comes to the home pregnant but not unwed. She plans to give up her baby because she knows she cannot be the mother it needs. But St. Elizabeth's is near a healing spring, and when Rose's time draws near, she cannot go through with her plans, not all of them. And she cannot remain forever untouched by what she has left behind...and who she has become in the leaving.

Discussion Questions

1. In *The Patron Saint of Liars*, the author uses the voices of Rose, Son, and Cecelia (Sissy) to tell the story. How does each voice reveal a distinct and unique character? Is each voice believable? What are the advantages or disadvantages to building a novel through multiple voices?
2. Discuss the many references to "leaving," to breaking connections to home, family, and responsibilities. Who are the "leavers" and who are the ones left? Can you find evidence of what Rose, Son, and Sissy think about all the leaving? Finally, who turns out to be a "stayer," and why is that important?
3. When first pregnant, Rose looks for a place "where women had babies and left them behind, like pieces of furniture too heavy to move." Does her concept of a child evolve during her drive to Kentucky, upon her arrival at St. Elizabeth's, and during the months before her delivery? Is there evidence of a changing attitude after Cecelia is born?
4. Beginning with Rose's first lie of omission, discuss the lies and liars in the novel. Relate the last lie, Son's lie to Sissy, to the structure of the novel and to the cycle of lies. You might ask, "Are all lies equal?"
5. Contrast the picture of southern California with that of St. Elizabeth's in Habit, Kentucky. How does the author achieve the sense of place? Is one place more real than the other? Is one more allegorical?

6. How does the author use the search for signs to move the story forward? Compare Rose's sign to marry with her sign to keep her baby. What about Lorraine's sign? Do you prefer to read the signs as messages from an external source or as the subconscious wishes of the characters? Are Son's tattoos signs of a different sort?
7. Describe the mother/daughter relationship between Rose and her mother. Is there evidence that Rose's mother is a good and loving mother? How is the relationship Rose has with Cecelia different, and why?
8. "Driving is the most important thing you can learn," Rose tells Sissy. "It's the secret of the universe." Explain Rose's impulse to drive. How has it been important to her, and why should she recommend it to Sissy? Does it relate to depression, escape, pilgrimage, or something else?
9. Rose tells us, "I have always taken names very seriously, people or places." How does the author use names to enrich the novel? Consider the names St. Elizabeth, Habit, Rose, Son, among others. What do you think about the controversy over Cecelia as a name? Do you know Rose's mother's name? -- who uses it and who does not?
10. Discuss Sister Evangeline. Can you make a case that she is the model for motherhood? Think about her relationship to St. Elizabeth's, to Rose, to the girls who come and go, to the unborn, to her own mother. Is it significant that she is a seer? That her hands bleed?
11. Describe Sissy's evolution from child to greater maturity. How does she progress? What do you see for her future?
12. How would you evaluate Rose's treatment of her two husbands? Do you sympathize with Thomas Clinton and Son? Can you understand Rose's behavior? Is she emotionally detached, selfish, cruel, just an independent woman? Does she have any model for marriage?
13. Rose advises Billy, "You should do whatever you want to, whatever you can live with best." Does Rose apply this philosophy to her own decisions? What does "whatever you can live with best" really mean to her?
14. Some readers may find an orderly resolution to the story, perhaps in Sissy's last thoughts about staying at St. Elizabeth's or Son's certainty that "Sissy made everything worthwhile." Other readers see odd people and troubled relationships that are ambiguous. What do you think? Do you find order? Or, alternatively, do you accept equivocal characters and motivations?

Summary and Discussion Questions from the publisher