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Johnston Public Library Book Discussion Questions

When the Jessamine Grows by Donna Everhart

Summary

Talk of impending war is a steady drumbeat throughout North Carolina, though Joetta McBride pays it little heed. The small farm she tends with her husband, Ennis, and their two sons provides all they need. Those who want to fight can fight, but Joetta considers her family to be neutral.

That opinion isn't shared by Joetta's father-in-law, Rudean. A staunch Confederate supporter, he fills his grandsons' heads with stories about the glories of soldiering, and insists that owning land and slaves is the only measure of success. When fifteen-year-old Henry, impressed by his grandfather's stories, runs off to volunteer, Joetta insists Ennis go and search for him.

Weeks pass without word from either father or son, though other soldiers pass the farm, growing ever gaunter and hungrier. Joetta offers food and shelter to all, regardless of which uniform they wear. Her actions are deemed treasonous by townsfolk and the Home Guard, but Joetta won't be swayed. After all, the wealthy find ways to stay away from battle. Why should poor men suffer and die on their behalf?

Though shunned and struggling, Joetta remains committed to her principles, and to her belief that her family will survive. But the greatest tests are still to come, for a fractured nation and for Joetta and those she loves . . .

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the novel, Joetta resolutely refuses to choose sides, insisting she is neutral. Do you believe it is possible to remain completely neutral in a time of war? Given the reaction from her community, do you think Joetta should have been so vocal about her determination to not take sides? Why or why not?
2. Even though she refuses to declare loyalty to the North or South, Joetta is undoubtedly a very loyal person. What do you think are her deepest loyalties? Are any of Joetta's loyalties similar to your own? Is there a difference between your loyalties as an individual and your loyalties as a member of an ethnic, religious, regional, or other kind of group? What do you do when they clash?

3. In the mid-1800s, the majority of white people in rural North Carolina were like the McBrides – subsistence farmers who were not enslavers. Why did so many of these people who did not benefit from slavery go on to fight for it on behalf of the Confederacy?
4. What do you think is Henry's primary motivation for running away to join the war when he's only fifteen? Does he believe in "the Southern cause?" Is he simply rebelling? When you were his age, did you make any decisions you later regretted? How did your parent or parents react?
5. When they discover Henry has left, Joetta wants Ennis to search for him immediately. He refuses, believing Henry should be held accountable for his decisions, while Joetta feels nothing but a mother's worry. This event creates an uncommon rift between them. Did you agree more with Ennis or Joetta in this situation? Why?
6. Mr. McBride is immensely resentful of Joetta's decision to allow Union soldiers access to her well. He foolishly talks about it while in town, and soon, a handful of men show up to destroy the McBrides' crops. Who do you think was most to blame for what happened, Joetta or Mr. McBride? What would you have done if you were in Joetta's position?
7. Bess Caldwell, Joetta's friend, encourages her to join the sewing group created to help the troops and to show loyalty to the Confederacy. Given what took place with the crops, Joetta decides it might be a good idea. After a tense exchange with two wealthy members of the group, she's asked not to return by Bess, who's certain Joetta will bring trouble to the Caldwells. Do you agree with what Bess did? Do you think Bess was betraying her friendship with Joetta, or do you think she was justified?
8. What does it mean to claim neutrality during a time of war? What are the moral implications? Are there instances when you believe it is immoral to remain neutral?
9. Robert resents his mother for many reasons. The moment she insisted his father go look for Henry, it seemed she could do nothing right from his viewpoint. How did you feel about Robert's behavior toward his mother?
10. Joetta takes in a young Union soldier, Charlie Hastings, who inadvertently gives Joetta something she desperately needs: someone to mother. In return, Joetta becomes a substitute mother to Charlie. What did you think of this special relationship?
11. Throughout human history, we've witnessed the lengths humans go to in order to survive. During the Civil War people ate almost anything for sustenance, were forced to hide for great lengths of time, and endured extreme weather, illness, and wounds. What is it about human nature that enables people to endure such hardships? What traits in Joetta and other characters enable them to cope?

12. Joetta has a special place called Fishing Creek, where she goes when confronted by a difficult situation or is feeling troubled. Do you have a special place you like to visit when you're feeling upset or distressed? Is it a place no one knows about but you? How did you discover it?
13. Mr. McBride often irritates Joetta (to say the least!), but their relationship changes over the course of the novel. Why do you think it becomes easier for them to get along? Is it because one or the other changes their views on topics they previously argued over? Or are there other reasons why their relationship changes? Do certain experiences help them understand one another better?
14. The activist Zainab Salbi has said, "If we are to understand war fully, we need to understand not only what happens on the front lines, but what happens on the back lines as well, where women are in charge of keeping life going." Did reading about Joetta's struggles change your understanding of the Civil War in any way?
15. Historical novels have the ability to shed light on contemporary issues, often teaching us something about the present through the lens of the past. Do you see parallels between the conflicts presented in this book and conflicts in American life today? How would you describe them? Which side are you on, and can you say anything good about the other side?
16. What do you think of the novel's title, *When the Jessamine Grows*? Why do you think the author chose it and what does it signify?

Summary from GoodReads.com
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