

Discussion Questions

The Borrowed Life of Frederick Fife by Anna Johnston

1. Fred's life changes forever when he encounters Bernard Greer at Wattle River. Why do you think the author chose to set this scene here? In what ways does the river symbolise themes of loss, memory, and renewal?
2. What does it mean to be a caregiver in this story? How do characters care for one another, even outside of Wattle River Nursing Home?
3. Fred, Hannah, Denise, Bernard, and Albert all experience loneliness in various ways. How does the author challenge traditional ideas of family through the unconventional connections formed between characters? What different kinds of love can you identify between them?
4. Bernard has memory loss and disorientation; Albert has dementia. Characters like these have altered perceptions of themselves and their relationships. What is the role of memory in shaping identity?
5. The reader is able to get to know Bernard through Fred's eyes and the memories of others. What do you think of Bernard as seen through others' viewpoints? How does his character develop, even when he is not present on the page?
6. Many characters have experienced loss. How do their reactions to grief differ, and how do these reactions shape their lives moving forward? What does it mean for Fred to lose his identity when he is confused for Bernard? How does Fred grapple with his loss of self, and in what ways is this different from how he grapples with the loss of his beloved late wife, Dawn?
7. How does Hannah's relationship with her sister and father evolve throughout the novel? What do you think this means for her relationship with Fred?
8. Guilt follows each of the main characters throughout their lives. What is the role of forgiveness in the novel? What emotions do guilt and forgiveness conjure in you?

9. Redemption and the idea of second chances are prominent themes throughout the novel. Discuss ways each of the key characters get another chance or are redeemed. Reflect on your own life and instances in which you had a chance to try again.

10. Based on the author's portrayal of ageing and elderly characters in this novel, what implications can we make about society's perceptions and attitudes toward elders? In what ways does the author challenge societal stereotypes and expectations surrounding aging?

11. Frederick Fife shows remarkable kindness and empathy to everyone he meets. How do these qualities influence the characters and events throughout the novel? The author hopes this story will help to "Spread the Fred"—that is, to inspire unconditional kindness in others. What are some small, everyday ways you could practice kindness like Fred?