A Guide for Book Clubs

Christmas Angels

Thank you for bringing *Christmas Angels* to your group. These questions are grouped by section, so you can take the book in parts or discuss it all at once. Use what is useful and ignore the rest — the best conversations tend to wander off the page anyway.

Themes to Explore

One note at a time. Carved above Laura Beall's door and spoken first by her mother — a way through music, a railroad, a depression and a season of grief.

Kindness as a chain reaction. One girl wipes an egg off a stranger's door, and a hundred and seven people end up resolving to be somebody's miracle.

Silence and secrets. Nearly every rupture in the book runs on something unsaid, and the novel weighs silence that protects against silence that corrodes.

What "perfect" means. Thea is deaf, Laura is nearly blind, Emerson is written off. Elizabeth Beall's answer is the standard the others are measured against.

Fathers who stay and fathers who leave. Popo, Edward Beall and Mr. Thompson — and Gus, who steps into the gap.

Women who run things. A cookie business, a library, a café, a railroad.

Where are the miracles? Bernard asks the question the novel has been circling.

Memory as inheritance. An old woman at a window, writing it all down.

Discussion Questions

Opening — the Prologue and Thea's birthday (Ch. 1–5)

1. The novel opens with an elderly Anna at her window, writing so that "generations to come might find hope in the depth of their own despair." How does knowing the ending is survivable change the way you read the hard parts?

2. Anna keeps hearing the line "there's nothing colder than the ashes of love" and can't place where it came from. What did you make of it before its source was revealed?

3. Anna blurts out the truth about Thea at the birthday supper. Was she right to? What would it have cost the family if she had kept quiet longer?

4. Mother doesn't yell — she goes silent and says she has a headache. Anna says she'd have preferred the anger. How does your family handle a blow like this?

5. Popo raises his hand as he walks away up South Street, and Anna can't tell whether it means stop or goodbye. What do you think he meant?

Beggars' Night and the stranger on the porch (Ch. 6–12)

6. The children chant at the house of a woman they've never met and call her "Ghosty." What makes a neighbor into a ghost story? Was there such a house where you grew up?

7. Anna goes back alone to clean the egg off the door. Where does that impulse come from — and why does she think first of what Popo would have done?

8. Anna is struck that her black dress is nearly a mirror image of Laura's, and wonders if she's looking into "a magical looking glass." What does Anna see in Laura that she wants for herself?

9. Gus takes the broom away and tells Anna, "We don't hit other people, not even if they deserve it." He also refuses the Widow Winslow's nickel. What kind of man is Gus becoming?

10. Anna tells Mother about the coin but leaves out that it's a half-dollar. What's the difference between privacy and a secret in this family?

Thanksgiving, birthdays, and Laura's story (Ch. 13–19)

11. Mother throws Uncle Karl out of Popo's chair and out of her house — and Anna calls it the most joyful Thanksgiving she'd known. Why is that scene satisfying rather than ugly?

12. Elizabeth Beall answers her husband's fear with “we'll teach her to see with her heart.” Edward's first reaction was fear, Elizabeth's was a plan. Were you harder on him than the book is?

13. Mother forgets Anna's tenth birthday. Laura tells her, “Life is too short to be angry with your mother,” and later makes it a command: “Cherish your mother!” Was that the right thing to say to a hurt ten-year-old?

14. Laura has spent her life practicing for a concert her mother will never hear, and wears black for a loss decades old. Is this devotion, or a kind of hiding?

15. Anna asks, “Where are the angels when you need them most?” Laura's answer — that they're holding her up — and the ceramic angel from Popo arrive the same night. Did the comfort land for you?

16. Laura makes Anna promise to love both her parents “no matter what.” Is that a fair thing to ask of a child?

Cookies, the pageant, and the finale (Ch. 20–25)

17. Mother accepts an order for eighty-eight dozen cookies in three days, and the whole household is conscripted. What does the work do for Mother that sympathy couldn't?

18. Aunt Lo maneuvers the hotel manager into freeing Mrs. Thompson for the pageant, and never tells Bernard. Is her meddling a kindness, a performance, or both?

19. Laura tells Anna she'd give the same effort for the King of England as for one child. Where in your own life does that standard feel true — or exhausting?

20. Thea climbs onto the chair Albright left in the “acoustical sweet spot” and lays her ear against the piano. Why does Anna leave her there instead of bringing her back?

21. Bernard throws away Aunt Lo's written prayer and improvises, taking the room into real despair before bringing it back. Would you have trusted a teenage boy with that?

22. The children vow “never again” about letting Bernard go hungry and alone. Which miracle feels largest to you: Thea's hearing, Laura's concert, Popo's return, or Bernard's parents standing in his circle?

Epilogue and Postscript

23. Popo comes home for Christmas Eve, but Mother never attends the pageant — and Anna tells us she prayed her mother would love her father again, and “she never did.” How did that ending sit with you?

24. Anna spends her life occupying the common ground between her parents, the place Gus filled before her. Is that a gift or a burden she inherited?

25. Anna is the one who tells Michael to speak, and puts Laura's hand on his face. What has the nine-year-old from Chapter One become by the last page?

26. Aunt Lo's last line: “if you don't believe in miracles, perhaps you've forgotten that you are one.” Does the book earn it?

Going Deeper

On the epigraph. The novel opens with Psalm 91:11. By the end, who are the angels of the title? Count them — the ceramic one on Anna's bureau, the paper wings on the choir robes, the ones Anna says Mother "ordered away" from Thea's sickbed, the snow angels in the front yard. What is the book arguing an angel is?

On Mother. Anna never once hears Mother speak aloud to God, yet Mother is the one who paces all night singing *All Through the Night* over a dying child. Is the lullaby her prayer?

On an unreliable warmth. This is a memoir written by a woman in her nineties, who tells us her sisters added "adult insights and fresh details" across hundreds of retellings. How much is 1933, and how much is seventy years of loving revision? Does it matter?

On the two who leave and come back. Popo always returns but never stays; Laura hadn't left her house in years until a child knocked. What does each one need that the other has?

Passages worth reading aloud. Elizabeth's "Let's build a railroad." Laura's "one note at a time." Mother's lullaby. Bernard's "God Almighty is very much alive." Aunt Lo on love: "Love needs tending." The Postscript.

Bringing It to Your Gathering

On the table. Maggie's apple sugar cookies, with apples and honey standing in for rationed sugar. Oatmeal cookies, Laura's favorite. Sugar-cream pie, the Indiana classic Uncle Karl grovels for. Roxy's Coney dogs. Fudge and caramels wrapped in wax paper. Horehound drops, strictly as a joke on Aunt Iris. Earl Grey, two sugars, poured into the best cups you own.

Set the scene. Carols in the background — *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, *Silent Night*. If someone plays, Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* turns the evening into Laura's concert. Candles, popcorn to string, and if you can find one, a Walking Liberty half-dollar to pass around.

Things to do together.

- **The shoebox.** Anna keeps her treasures in one. Ask everyone to bring one small object they've kept for no practical reason, and say why.
- **One note at a time.** Go around the table: name one thing you're facing that can only be done one note at a time.
- **Be the miracle.** Decide on one small, specific thing your group will do before the next meeting.
- **Snow angels, optional.** Weather permitting. Charlie made a perfect one.
- **The word game.** Charlie's word was *antidisestablishmentarianism*. Bring the longest or strangest word you know and make the others guess.

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