

That Which Binds Us

Discussion Guide

1. *That Which Binds Us* is written from the first-person points of view of five primary characters: Elizabeth Young, Patrick Hagan, Marilee Kitchens, Ben Grubb, and Red Hopkins. Why do you think Rigg chose to tell the story this way? What does each character bring, in terms of narration? Which character is your favorite?
2. A central conflict in the novel is set up in the earliest pages, regarding the relationship between twin brothers: Elizabeth's papa, Jonathan Young, and Elizabeth's uncle, Rufus Young (Uncle Ruck). What purpose did this conflict serve in the story? How did you feel about each of these characters in the first half of the novel? Did your feelings change by the end of the book?
3. The teacher, Marilee, tells Patrick she believes she can help "the poor unfortunates" of the area through education—a comment that doesn't sit well with him. How did you react when she said that? Why do you think he feels the way he does?
4. The novel features a triangle of religions with distinct differences between their doctrines and faith practices: Primitive Baptist, Roman Catholic, and Abijah Alley's "free love" faith. Why is this important in the novel? Which characters' motivations or actions are driven by their beliefs?
5. Marilee quickly falls for Patrick, seeing him as her equal in "a barren land." He regards her as a good friend. Although their relationship never progresses much beyond that, she hopes against hope, remaining devoted to him for years. Why do you think she did that? Do you fault her for it? Why do you think Patrick *didn't* fall for Marilee? Do you fault him? Have you ever hoped against hope for something?
6. Another thread throughout the novel is the brotherhood of the Freemasons—the world's oldest, largest, and most well-known fraternal organization. Membership is based on your own "free will and accord," and in the novel, Ruck chooses to pursue membership while Jonathan does not. Why do you think each of these men made the decisions they did regarding the Freemasons?
7. In Part Three: War, we never hear directly from Elizabeth. Instead, we learn of her situation in bits and pieces through Ben as he responds to her letters, as well as through Patrick, who has some interaction with her through his work on behalf of the Committee on Widows and Families. Why do you think Rigg chose

to write the war years in this way? How does this inform Elizabeth's character even though we aren't hearing directly from her?

8. Patrick Hagan buys his way out of military service and conscription, making the case that he is far more valuable to the community and to the war effort if he is at home doing the work he is doing. This was a real option during the Civil War based on The Enrollment Act of 1863, which provided that a draftee could pay a substitute \$300 (about \$5,000 in today's terms) to enlist in his place. What do you think of this policy? Do you believe Patrick's rationale for making that choice? Do you believe that his intentions in doing so were for good?
9. After Ben's death, Red Hopkins tells Elizabeth the full truth of the secret of what happened between her papa and her Uncle Ruck—a story only he can tell. He fills in details up to the very end, but when she asks if Ruck ever learned the truth about his daughter, Red lies. Why do you think he kept this one detail to himself? Do you think it was the right decision?
10. After she learns that Patrick gave Ben the tract of land before Ben and Elizabeth were married, Elizabeth burns down the home she'd shared with Ben. Why do you think she did this?
11. As you consider the novel and its conflicts, what are the things that tear us apart? What are the things that bind us together?