

## A READING GROUP GUIDE

### ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The suggested questions are included to enhance your group's reading of Michelle Collins Anderson's *The Moonshine Women!*



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the prologue of *The Moonshine Women*, the premature baby is supposed be—according to an array of old wives’ tale tests and superstitions—a boy. When a disappointed Hiram Strong holds his third daughter in his hands instead, he christens her “Jace,” which means “the Lord is salvation” and declares that she will save the family. Does she?
2. A colt’s tongue cooked in cast iron to cure epilepsy; a potato carried in a pocket to ward off rheumatism. Lidy Strong is full of what people in the Ozark hills call “granny cures.” Which one did you find the most interesting or surprising? Can you share one from your own culture or upbringing?
3. Alcohol—particularly “moonshine”—is problematic for the Strong family. Both Hiram and his abusive father were alcoholics; Jed’s drinking dramatically changes his personality for the worse. Yet . . . it becomes the family’s livelihood during Prohibition. Shine even ends up slinging drinks at the Southern Club in Hot Springs to pay off a debt. How do they survive with this cognitive dissonance? And what does it say that none of the Strong daughters drink except for what the job requires?
4. The one “Strong woman” we don’t hear from directly in the novel is Alta. Hiram worships and grieves her; a put-upon Lidy resents her. Rebecca and Elsie crave her softness and stories—while Shine has no memories of her at all. How do you feel about this complicated voiceless character? Do you believe—as Shine comes to—that she shouldn’t be judged too harshly for her worst transgression or mistake?
5. There are many motherless daughters in *The Moonshine Women*, from the three Strong daughters to Birdie and little Wren. How do the women mother each other? Do sisterhood

and female friendship become even more important when our mother figures are unavailable or gone?

6. Hiram calls Shine his “daughter of the spirit.” He wishes he could take credit for her fire, but “he knew it was not his. Yet he protected it, nourished it, tried his best to temper it. She would be the strongest of the Stronges, the best of the batch. This Shine honored him most of all, carrying his name along with his know-how.” What does he mean? How does Hiram’s love and acceptance play a part in Shine’s later decision to form and embrace her own unconventional family bonds? In the end, who do you think is the “strongest Strong?”?
7. The “cow shoes” that Shine wore to cover her tracks were just one creative way that moonshiners and bootleggers kept their operations clandestine during Prohibition. The novel mentions tricked-out cars with hidden compartments and specially crafted garments and containers worn to conceal liquor on the human body. Have you heard of others that you found particularly clever?
8. Elsie is a storyteller like her mother; a young woman who desperately wants to believe in “happily ever after.” How does that outlook affect her choices about motherhood and marriage? Eventually she comes to understand that “the most important stories are the ones we tell to—and about—ourselves,” and that she is stronger than she (or anyone else) knew. Do you agree that sometimes we just need to “rescue [our] own damn self”?
9. Throughout most of the novel, Shine is bent on revenge—first for Hiram’s death and later for her friend Birdie’s rape—and continually thwarted. But when she finally has a chance to exact some justice in the barn loft, Shine balks. Later, she muses that revenge had seemed “satisfying. And if not easy, at least straightforward: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But mercy? And forgiveness? That was tougher. More compli-

cated. Meandering. Certainly not achieved in one hotheaded instant.” How does this shift in her understanding allow Shine to move forward instead of being mired in the past?

10. Rebecca is not much of a conversationalist—except for one-sided talks she has with the farm animals and the wild creatures of their land. How does her reluctance to speak up about Jed cause trouble? And later, with Eulalie? Discuss some of the complicating factors in her romantic relationship. What finally pushes her to risk giving voice to her own wants and desires?
11. As Lidy dies, she welcomes the transformation of her ruined earthly body into a “clear burning spirit with an unexpected kick.” If Lidy is moonshine, what spirit or drink best describes you and why?
12. Two devastating crashes in the novel happen almost simultaneously: Jed and Rebecca’s car accident as they are pursued by the law and the stock market crash of October 1929. How does the aftermath of the wreck affect the Strong family? How does it mirror what happens to their community, Hot Springs and the country at large as the Great Depression takes hold?
13. When Shine begins her bartending gig at the Southern Club, she is both starry-eyed and fearful of her first famous customer, Al Capone. She believes they are “the same on some level, willing to do whatever it took to survive and keep their families safe and cared for.” Do you agree? Or does Shine discover a line she won’t or can’t cross?
14. Lidy believes “the lot of women isn’t right”—specifically that an undesired pregnancy disproportionately affects the female who will be “saddled with their mistake for the rest of her life.” This situation plays out repeatedly over the course of the novel, from Alta and Elsie to, perhaps most heartbreakingly, Birdie. Do you agree with Lidy? Or is hers a sentiment

and symptom of the era? What about her tongue-in-cheek assertion that “There’d be no babies if it were up to men to carry and birth them. The end of the human race”?

15. Jed is trouble from the beginning, and he causes headaches, heartache and even a couple of broken bones for various Strong women throughout the book. At his core, he longs to be a part of the Strong family and the moonshine business. When circumstances create the opportunity for him to join in at last, how does he handle it? Do you feel sorry for him? Are his feelings of being used and discarded valid? Or is the world—at least the Strong’s world—truly better off without him?
16. John Flanagan is an idealist whose experience as a “prohi” reflects the arc of the temperance movement and failed Prohibition experiment—as he goes from passionate believer to an increasingly skeptical and finally disillusioned veteran. How does this “rule follower” fare with a rogue partner, armed mountain moonshiners and well-connected criminals? What finally jolts him out of his passivity to pursue what he really wants?
17. Of Lidy, Elsie says, “Right or wrong, but never indifferent. She was a Strong through and through.” Did you agree with the steely matriarch’s decisions to do what she thought best—whether keeping a painful secret or ending a life prematurely?
18. Making moonshine requires careful identification of the different parts of the distillate: the poisonous “foreshots,” the “heads” (which still contain too much methanol for human consumption), and the coveted “hearts,” the smooth sweet middle before the final slick stuff of the “tails.” While Shine becomes an expert at discerning the difference at an early age, she is far less adept at handling matters of her own head and heart—until it’s almost too late. Are you glad she gets a second chance with John?

19. Shine decides “she would make a family like she and her daddy had made moonshine, putting together a bunch of unlikely ingredients, things that didn’t come from the same place, or naturally go together. Stir it all up and see what happened. Test it. *Taste* it. And then crank up the heat. Because that was life, wasn’t it? The fire that you couldn’t always control. But what you made of it, what you *did* with it . . . that could be something special. Something you could see *through*—stunningly clear and shining and powerful. The Strong stuff.” This metaphor for the complicated ways in which families are created, tested and constantly changed seems appropriate for most of our families. Do you agree?