

First Thursday Book Group Discussion Questions

A Spool of Blue Thread

by Anne Tyler

March 7, 2019, 2pm. Elsie Chan hosts. Mary La Husen leads the discussion

1. What are the main themes of the novel? Which did you find most thought-provoking?
2. The novel opens and closes with Denny. Do you think he's the main character? If not, who is?
3. We don't learn the full significance of the title until nearly the end (page 350). How did this delay make the metaphor more powerful? What is the metaphor?
4. On page 10, Tyler writes, "Well, of course they did hear from him again. The Whitshanks weren't a *melodramatic* family." What type of family are they? Compare the way you see them with the way they see themselves.
5. Chapter 2 begins with the Whitshank family stories: "These stories were viewed as quintessential—as *defining*, in some way—and every family member, including Stem's three-year-old, had heard them told and retold and embroidered and conjectured upon any number of times." (page 40) Why are these two stories so important? Why is the story of Red's sister important to Red's family?
6. "Patience, in fact, was what the Whitshanks imagined to be the theme of their two stories—patiently lying in wait for what they believed should come to them." (page 57) Others might say it was envy or disappointment. Which interpretation makes the most sense to you? Can you think of another linking theme?
7. How does Abby's story about the day she fell in love with Red fit into the Whitshank family history? Why isn't it one of the family's two defining stories?
8. Much is made of Abby's "orphans," which we learn also include Stem. What does her welcoming of strangers into her home say about her character? How do the others' responses set up a subtle contrast?
9. Discuss the character Denny. Why is he so resentful of Stem? Why is he so secretive about his life?
10. Do Red and Abby have favorite children and grandchildren? Who do you think each one favors?
11. On page 151, Tyler writes about Abby: "She had always assumed that when she was old, she would have total confidence, finally. But look at her: still uncertain." Do you think Abby's family sees her as uncertain or lacking in confidence? Why or why not?

12. Abby dies suddenly in an accident, just as Red's parents did. When it came to his parents, "Red was of the opinion that instantaneous death was a mercy..." (page 153) Do you think he felt the same way after Abby's death?
13. Why didn't Abby tell Red about Stem's mother? Why didn't Denny tell Stem? And why, after they learn the truth, does Stem make Red and Denny promise not to tell anyone else?
14. At Abby's funeral, Reverend Alban speculates that heaven may be "a vast consciousness that the dead return to," bringing their memories with them (page 189.) What do you think of his theory? What do you imagine Abby would say about it?
15. Why did Red's pausing to count the rings on the felled poplar make Abby fall in love with him?
16. The novel isn't structured chronologically. How does Tyler use shifts in time to reveal character and change the reader's perception?
17. What is the significance of the porch swing? What does it tell us about Linnie Mae and Junior?
18. After reading their story, how did your opinion of Linnie Mae change?
19. The Whitshank house, built by Junior and maintained by Red, is practically a character in the novel. What does it mean to the Whitshank family? Why, in the end, does it seem easy for Red to leave?
20. On the train at the end of the novel, Denny sits next to a teenage boy who cries quietly. What is the significance of this scene?