

Reading Guide Questions

On the Rocks by Sue Hallgarth

1. How much did you know about Willa Cather before you read *On the Rocks*? What do you know about her life? About the lives she created in her fiction? How would you guess they might be similar? Different?
2. Did this novel help you know more about Willa Cather? Edith Lewis? About the world they lived in? What kinds of details did you pick up?
3. Many readers are interested in how writers and artists develop their talents. Does it surprise you to learn that Willa Cather was first a journalist and later managing editor of a popular, muckraking magazine in New York City before she shifted to writing fiction full time? How does that inform your understanding of her as a writer?
4. Have you thought much about how “independent women” spend their time? Were you surprised to learn about women’s summer colonies? In what ways do you think such colonies might be important? Is there anything similar to them now?
5. Writers often need privacy and quiet in which to work. Willa Cather found privacy and quiet on Grand Manan. She would also spend a few months writing at a resort hotel in Jaffrey Center, NH after returning to the mainland each fall. Do you know of other writers who have found ‘retreats’ in which to work? Who and where?
6. Were you surprised at the attitudes of the islanders toward independent women in the 1920s? How accurate do you think that depiction might be? How have attitudes changed since the 1920s? Stayed the same?
7. Willa Cather once said, “the world broke in two” in 1922. Why do you suppose she chose that year and what do you think she might have meant?
8. Some have said that Prohibition encouraged crime. What do you know about Prohibition? About bootleggers and speakeasies? About men like Al Capone? When and why was Prohibition repealed? Are there any parallels in today’s world?