

WELCOME BACK

By Lin Stepp

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In Chapter One, Lydia Cunningham is leaving Atlanta to move back to North Carolina. Her sons—J.T., Billy Dale (Will) and Parker—are not happy about it. Why? What reasons does Lydia give them for going back? Why did she leave the farm before and what work has she been doing in Atlanta?
2. Lydia calls her mother-in-law Estelle Whitmeyer Cunningham “a difficult woman.” Do you think Lydia’s statement was accurate? What things did you learn about Estelle, as the book unfolded, that show why Estelle might have been a difficult woman for many to get along with and understand? Have you ever known anyone like Estelle or had to deal with an “Estelle” in your own family?
3. How long has Lydia been gone from North Carolina and Cunningham Farm? When she returns she finds some things the same and some things changed. Discuss examples of each. How is her husband John different and the same?
4. What did you learn about Hill House and Main House as you followed Lydia’s journey back to the farm? Study the map of Cunningham Farm in the front of the book to see where these houses and others in the book stand. Do you remember who lives in each? Have you ever been on a large farm where several families live in homes on the overall property? Which home does Lydia have the happiest memories of? How does Lydia later dispel some of her negative memories of Main House? Who gives her counsel in how to do this?
4. It is Lydia’s grandsons Billy Dean and Bucky that made the “Welcome Back” banner that welcomes Lydia back to Hill House. The boys soon call Lydia “Nana Lydia.” Why do they call John “Daddy John”? Where is their natural father? What happened to break up Mary Beth and Sonny’s relationship? What do you think has helped these boys to be so unaffected by their father’s desertion? What did you enjoy about these six-year old twins in the story?
5. Cunningham Farms is known for its “calicos and collies.” What is the story behind this statement? What gifts are left for Lydia as soon as she arrives back at the farm? Have you ever owned collies or calicos?
6. In Chapter Four, Lydia tells John that she had expected arguments, awkwardness, quarreling, angry looks, stony silences, and recriminations to occur when they first met again. What happened instead? Why was this so unexpected? How do John and Lydia have different feelings about this?

7. Lydia tells John at one point that one of his problems is that he never wants to talk things through, that he always wants to deal with problems tomorrow or pretend they either aren't really there or aren't of importance. As the book progresses, what do you learn is behind this characteristic of John's? Does he see this trait as wrong? Do you know people who are reluctant to talk things out? Do you think this is a trait more characteristic of men than women? Why? How did John's sister Holly handle the same issues? How does she help Lydia understand John's childhood better?

8. Cunningham Farms is an old historic apple orchard—and a large one—which has been in the same family for generations. There are many apple orchards around the area in western North Carolina, busy with events in the fall season. Have you ever been to one, attended an Apple Festival, or visited a large apple orchard? What did you learn about apple farming in this book? What is June Drop? What is a Rattler Apple? What are some types of apples grown on Cunningham farm?

9. There are two budding romances in this book—one between Lydia and John and the other between Neal Caldwell and Mary Beth. What is different about the two relationships? What obstacles exist that make it difficult for both couples to get together easily? What changes occur in the book helping each couple to realize they are right for each other and resolving the difficulties between them?

10. There is a ghost in this book. The twins see it and later Lydia sees it. How did the boys, and later Lydia, they describe it and where did they see it? What were the two legends, about the Cherokee Indian Red Hawk and about Nance Dude, that people used to possibly explain the ghost? Who did you imagine the ghost might be as you read the book? Do you believe in ghosts? Why or why not? What do Mary Beth and John believe about ghosts—and what do they teach the twins about them? Who did you learn the “ghost” really was?

11. Many Cherokee live around the Maggie Valley area as well as in the nearby Cherokee Indian Reservation and there were Cherokees in this book. What did you think of Manu and Ela Raintree? What were their best characteristics? Why had the Crow and Youngblood families come to live on Silas Greene's land? Did you think Nalin and Davy were justified in doing what they did to save their sister Izabelle? What mistakes did they make afterwards and why? What did you think of Silas and Loretha Greene? Did Loretha throw the family off her land after she learned what happened to her husband? Why or why not?

12. Clogging is very popular around the Maggie Valley area and many champion cloggers live there. Where did Lydia, John, Tolley and Rebecca go clogging together? How does John talk Lydia into going? What did they wear? Have you ever seen pictures of the Cataloochee Ranch on the top of the mountain where the two couples went? Have you ever seen or tried clogging?

13. John has a broken relationship with his sons as well as his wife. What caused this? John tells Lydia he thinks his sons should have been the first to reestablish a relationship with him after their differences. What is Lydia's response to this? Why does she say it is John's responsibility more than the boys? How does he react? What does Lydia say that causes John to go to Atlanta later to talk with his sons? How does that go?

14. What did you think of Lydia's Aunt Martha Howard? What parts does she play in this book in being a help to Lydia, her sons,—and later in also being a help to John? What did you think about her frequent advice to Lydia to: "Get more information." How can that help to resolve problems? How did J.T.'s wife Laura use her "information" and understanding about conflict management and mediation to help John and the boys resolve their differences? Have you ever studied about—or participated in—any conflict management techniques or methods?

15. Lydia and John take the twins hiking in Cataloochee Valley on a lovely trail called the Caldwell Fork Trail. How does this day help to bind Lydia and John closer together? How does the information John shares with the twins about 'how far they are from Cunningham Farm' and 'how far it would be to walk across the mountain to the farm on Hemphill Bald Trail' later help the boys to get home when they are kidnapped?

16. Why does Sonny Harper kidnap his own children? What does he want in doing this? How do his actions affect his parents—and his sons? What does Sonny's father do when he learns what Sonny has done? How do the boys get away from Sonny? How is Neal a help to Mary Beth in this situation and how does Neal's support make her feel more certain about her feelings for him? Who initiates the idea that Neal and Mary Beth should get married after the twins are found?

17. Oliver Wheaton, the pastor of the Fairview Methodist Church, ends up being a counsel and help to many members of the Cunningham family, including John and Lydia. How does he help John as they talk in the cemetery? How does he also later help Lydia in the same setting? What little weakness is revealed about Oliver, as he talks to John earlier in the book, showing that he is very human? What was the problem with the minister before Oliver? Have you met ministers like Oliver who were a help to you in times past when you had a problem or concern?

18. Besides the main characters in this book, there were many interesting side characters throughout the story—the Sheppard family, Eugene and Ozetta, Sam and Doris, Charlie and Nevlyn, Chuck and Vera. ... Sheriff Sutton and his deputy ... Lydia and John's friends Tolley and Rebecca Allbright. ... Ela and Manu Raintree. Who was memorable among these ... or what other side characters in the book did you enjoy and why? What main character did you like most in this story?

