Orphan Train

A novel

Christina Baker Kline

P.S. Insights, interviews & more...
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Reading Group Guide

1. On the surface, Vivian’s and Molly’s lives couldn’t be more different. In what ways are their stories similar?

2. In the prologue Vivian mentions that her “true love” died when she was 23, but she doesn’t mention the other big secret in the book. Why not?

3. Why hasn’t Vivian ever shared her story with anyone? Why does she tell it now?

4. What role does Vivian’s grandmother play in her life? How does the reader’s perception of her shift as the story unfolds?

5. Why does Vivian seem unable to get rid of the boxes in her attic?

6. In Women of the Dawn, a nonfiction book about the lives of four Wabanaki Indians excerpted in the epigraph, Bunny McBride writes: “In portaging from one river to another, Wabanakis had to carry their canoes and all other possessions. Everyone knew the value of traveling light and understood that it required leaving some things behind. Nothing encumbered movement more than fear, which was often the most difficult burden to surrender.” How does the concept of portaging reverberate throughout this novel? What fears hamper Vivian’s progress? Molly’s?

7. Vivian’s name changes several times over the course of the novel: from Niamh Power to Dorothy Nielsen to Vivian Daly. How are these changes significant for her? How does each name represent a different phase of her life?

8. What significance, if any, does Molly Ayer’s name have?

9. How did Vivian’s first-person account of her youth and the present-day story from Molly’s third-person-limited perspective work together? Did you prefer one story to the other? Did the juxtaposition reveal things that might not have emerged in a traditional narrative?

10. In what ways, large and small, does Molly have an impact on Vivian’s life? How does Vivian have an impact on Molly’s?

11. What does Vivian mean when she says, “I believe in ghosts”?

12. When Vivian finally shares the truth about the birth of her daughter and her decision to put May up for adoption she tells Molly that she was “selfish” and “afraid.” Molly defends her and affirms Vivian’s choice. How did you perceive Vivian’s decision? Were you surprised she sent her child to be adopted after her own experiences with the Children’s Aid Society?
13. When the children are presented to audiences of potential caretakers, the Children’s Aid Society explains adoptive families are responsible for the child’s religious upbringing. What role does religion play in this novel? How do Molly and Vivian each view God?
14. When Vivian and Dutchy are reunited she remarks, “However hard I try, I will always feel alien and strange. And now I’ve stumbled on a fellow outsider, one who speaks my language without saying a word.” How is this also true for her friendship with Molly?
15. When Vivian goes to live with the Byrnes Fanny offers her food and advises, “You got to learn to take what people are willing to give.” In what ways is this good advice for Vivian and Molly? What are some instances when their independence helped them?
16. Molly is enthusiastic about Vivian’s reunion with her daughter, but makes no further efforts to see her own mother. Why is she unwilling or unable to effect a reunion in her own family? Do you think she will someday?
17. Vivian’s Claddagh cross is mentioned often throughout the story. What is its significance? How does its meaning change or deepen over the course of Vivian’s life?

http://christinabakerkline.com/novels/orphan-train/reading-group-guide/
Book Discussion Questions: Orphan Train by Christina Baker Kline

*Posted January 21, 2015 by MPPL*

1. Were the orphan trains a good thing? Why or why not? What, if any, better options were available at the time?
2. What did you notice about the style of writing and how this story was put together?
3. Thinking back on the children that were highlighted in the book, Carmine, Dutchy and Niamh, what were the motivations of the families who took in these orphans? How did these differing motivations affect the children’s lives?
4. What similarities or differences are there between the past as shown in the story and our present foster care system?
5. In what ways are Molly and Vivian similar? How are they different?
6. Do you have things that you don't use or are stored away but you can't part with? What are those things and why do you keep them?
7. What would a timeline of Vivian’s life look like? Use a white board to diagram this or just do it verbally. What characterizes each segment of her life?
8. What would a timeline of Molly’s life look like? What characterizes each segment of her life?
9. “You can’t find peace till you find all the pieces.” How is this true in Vivian’s life? How is it true in Molly’s life?
10. Molly’s charms on her necklace are mentioned throughout the story. What is their significance? What did Vivian’s Claddagh cross and Molly’s charms mean to them?
11. How has Molly changed Vivian’s life? How has Vivian changed Molly’s life?
12. Read the prologue aloud to the group. Having read the book and rereading the prologue what does this tell you about Vivian’s view of the people in her past? What does this show about her character?
13. How did you feel about the way the author ended the story? Is Vivian’s happy ending enough?
14. If you were to write additional chapters to the book what would happen to Vivian, to Molly?
15. *The American Experience*, a PBS show, has a program on the orphan trains. There was also a movie made in 1979 called *The Orphan Train*. Do you think this book will come to the big screen? Would you want to see it?

The Story Behind the Writing of Orphan Train

Dear Reader,

One holiday season, about a decade ago, an unexpected blizzard changed the course of my life. Visiting my mother-in-law in Fargo, North Dakota, for a week with my husband and three young sons, we woke up one morning in the dark, the windows blanketed with snow. The boys shrieked, threw on ski pants, and ran outside to make snow angels and igloo tunnels, but after a few minutes they trudged back inside, icicles dripping from their noses and boots full of slush. As the snowfall grew heavier we watched the cars in the driveway disappear, along with any dreams we might have had of going sledding or shopping.

There was no escape: we were housebound. On the second day, after several interminable games of Sorry with my younger two boys, I escaped to find their bookish older brother, Hayden, on his stomach in the living room, leafing through a publication I’d never seen before. Called “Century of Stories,” it was a celebration of Jamestown, ND’s centennial in 1983, filled with articles and photographs. “Hayden, there’s a story in there about my dad, your great-grandfather, that might interest you,” my mother-in-law, Carole, was saying. I knew that Carole had grown up in Jamestown and that her father, a taciturn and somewhat aloof man, had been president of the local bank – but that was all. So it was quite a surprise to read the article about him, “They called it ‘Orphan Train’: And it proved there was a home for many children on the prairie.”

![Orphan Train Image](image)

This story stunned me, and led me to the Internet and the library to do research. In all my years of schooling I’d never heard about the 200,000 poor, orphaned, and abandoned city children who were sent on trains to the Midwest from the East Coast between 1854 and 1929. I didn’t know that the Methodist minister who concocted this idea, Charles Loring Brace, conceived of it as a way to get underage criminals and vagrants off the crowded streets of New York, and provide free labor (along with a strong dose of Christian values) to poor farmers in the sparsely
populated heartland. I didn’t know that most of these children believed the train they were on was the only one, and that it wasn’t until the 1960s – usually at the urging of their own children – that they began to tell their stories.

I was hooked. Over the next few years I read hundreds of nonfiction narratives and talked to half a dozen of the few remaining “train riders,” as they call themselves, all between the ages of 90 and 100. These older people, and their hard-won perspective, fascinated me as much as their stories did, each one of which contained its own alchemy of heartbreak and grace. I soon realized that I’d found the focus for my next novel.

Every detail this book is rooted in history, but Vivian – the train rider in my novel – goes on a journey that is entirely her own. It isn't until a rebellious 17-year-old girl with secrets of her own starts asking pointed questions that Vivian finally tells her story. I hope you’ll find Orphan Train as enthralling to read as I did to research and write. Once you’ve read it, I welcome your thoughts and questions. You can find me through my website’s Contact page, or my Facebook page.

All best,
Christina

Interview With Christina Baker Kline: #1 New York Times Bestselling Author of Orphan Train

04/18/2014 05:38 pm ET | Updated Jun 18, 2014

Loren Kleinman Author, This Way to Forever, lorenkleinman.com

Christina Baker Kline is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of Orphan Train and four other novels: Bird in Hand, The Way Life Should Be, Desire Lines and Sweet Water. She lives outside of New York City.

Loren Kleinman (LK): Your books explore the “legacy of trauma.” Talk about how trauma contributes to our life’s story. In other words, how does trauma define our lives? And is there the possibility to love and live again after trauma?

Christina Baker Kline (CBK): Most people are remarkably resilient. Even those who have been through war or great loss often find reservoirs of strength. But the legacy of trauma is a heavy burden to bear. In Orphan Train, I wanted to write about how traumatic events beyond our control can shape and define our lives. “People who cross the threshold between the known world and that place where the impossible does happen discover the problem of how to convey that experience,” the novelist Kathryn Harrison wrote. Many train riders were ashamed of this part of their past, and carried the secret of it for decades, and sometimes until they died. Over the course of Orphan Train Vivian moves from shame about her past to acceptance, eventually coming to terms with what she’s been through. In the process she learns about the regenerative power of claiming — and telling — one’s life story. Perhaps the main message of my novel is that shame and secrecy can keep us from becoming our full selves. It’s not until we speak up that we can move past the pain and step forward. And yes — you can learn to love and live again.

LK: I also explore the fallout of traumatic events. I was initially attracted to the idea of trauma narratives after experiencing a particular personal trauma. I can say that the trauma prompted another life course, but I’m not sure it defined me. I’m still exploring that through therapy and time. What attracted you to writing about trauma? Do you consider trauma an illusion? Does it have to control us?

CBK: As a novelist I have always been interested in how people come to terms with difficult, life-altering events. I am intrigued by the spaces between words, the silences that conceal long-kept secrets, the complexities that lie beneath the surface. How do people tell the stories of their lives and what do those stories reveal, intentionally or not, about who they are? I don’t think that trauma is an illusion; there is no question in my mind that circumstances beyond our control can shape and define us. But ultimately we make choices about letting ourselves be defined by our pasts.
LK: Let’s talk about *Orphan Train*. You mention rootlessness being a major theme of the book, which seems a result or symptom of being an orphan. Do you agree? Does one have to experience abandonment to feel a sense of rootlessness?

CBK: Many people, for many reasons, feel rootless — but orphans and abandoned or abused children have particular cause. I think I was drawn to the orphan train story in part because two of my own grandparents were orphans who spoke little about their early lives. My own background is partly Irish, and so I decided that I wanted to write about an Irish girl who has kept silent about the circumstances that led her to the orphan train.

LK: Was Vivian Daly, the first-person speaker of *Orphan Train*, rootless? Do you consider such rootlessness traumatic for the narrator? How do you identify with her and her experience? How does she recover?

CBK: Despite having lived in many places, Vivian can’t really call any of them home: Ireland, New York, the Midwest, even Maine, where she ends up. Until she learns the truth about her past, she doesn’t feel particularly connected to anyone or anywhere. But eventually she begins to connect with Molly, a 17-year-old Penobscot Indian foster child. Vivian is a wealthy 91-year-old widow, and at first it seems they have nothing in common. But as I wrote my way into the narrative I could see that in addition to some biographical parallels — both characters have dead fathers and institutionalized mothers; both were passed from home to home and encountered prejudice because of cultural stereotypes; both held onto talismanic keepsakes from family members — they are psychologically similar. For both of them, change has been a defining principle; from a young age, they had to learn to adapt, to inhabit new identities. They’ve spent much of their lives minimizing risk, avoiding complicated entanglements, and keeping silent about the past. It’s not until Vivian — in answer to Molly’s pointed questions — begins to face the truth about what happened long ago that both of them have the courage to make changes in their lives.

The necklaces the women wear become the catalyst for connection between them, though I didn’t originally intend to give both of them necklaces with metaphorical significance. In my research I learned that though children weren’t allowed to bring anything with them on the orphan trains, some did smuggle small keepsakes. These became increasingly important to them as the years went by. In Galway I went into the small corner shop where the Claddagh, a traditional Irish emblem with two hands encircling a heart, was invented and realized that I’d found my Irish-immigrant character Vivian’s keepsake. Later, researching Maine Penobscot Indian legends, I discovered that certain animals — a fish, a raven, a bear — have specific powers and talismanic significance. These, I knew, would be important to my half-Native American character, Molly.

As I wrote the novel I wove the stories together so that they contained echoes of, and references to, each other. Vivian’s grandmother gives her a Claddagh necklace in one section, and then pages later Molly comments on the necklace in the present-day story. Vivian later
notes the charms around Molly’s neck. I didn’t want the references to be too literal or overt. But the necklaces became a way to connect my characters literally through touch and figuratively through a shared depth of feeling.

Though I am not much like either of these characters, I found myself identifying with (and rooting for!) each of them as the story progressed.

**LK: Do you consider Vivian a survivor or a victim? Why? Why not?**

CBK: She, like most of us, contains multitudes. She is both.

**LK: Are you a survivor?**

CBK: I actually prefer the term “veteran.” I am a veteran of trauma and many other things.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/loren-kleinman/interview-with-christina-b_5175099.html
Orphan Train Historical Background

I am interested in exploring how people tell the stories of their lives and what these stories reveal (intentionally or not) about who we are. I am intrigued by the spaces between words, the silences that conceal long-kept secrets, the elisions that belie surface appearance. And I am interested in the pervasive and insidious legacy of trauma – the way events beyond our control can shape and define our lives. All of my books address these themes.

Like my four previous novels, my novel *Orphan Train* is about cultural identity and family history. For the first time, however, I am undertaking a project that requires a large amount of historical, cultural, and geographical research. My novel traces the journey of Vivian Daly, a now-90-year-old woman, from a small village in Ireland to the crowded streets of the Lower East Side to the wide-open expanses of the Midwest to the coast of Maine. Her life spans nearly a century, encompassing great historical change and upheaval.

Change has been the defining principle of Vivian Daly’s life, and from a very young age she learned to adapt, to inhabit new identities. For many reasons, she has told no one about her early life: her difficult childhood in Ireland and the lies and secrets that propelled her, alone, toward a frighteningly open-ended future. She spent her entire adult life minimizing risk, avoiding complicated entanglements, and keeping silent about the past. But now, through a series of events, she encounters a stranger who wants to know her story. As Vivian begins to face the truth about what happened long ago, the past becomes more and more present for her. Vivian’s recollections come in tiers: her turbulent adulthood in the Midwest; her early life on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, living in a tenement; and finally, her childhood in Kinvara, on the western coast of Ireland.

*Orphan Train* is a specifically American story of mobility and rootlessness, highlighting a little-known but historically significant moment in our country’s past. Between 1854 and 1929, so-called “orphan
trains" transported more than 200,000 orphaned, abandoned, and homeless children – many of them first-generation Irish Catholic immigrants – from the coastal cities of the eastern United States to the Midwest for “adoption” (often, in fact, indentured servitude). Charles Loring Brace, who founded the program, believed that hard work, education, and firm but compassionate childrearing – not to mention Midwestern Christian family values – were the only way to save these children from a life of depravity and poverty.

The children, many of whom had experienced great trauma in their short lives, had no idea where they were going. The train would pull into a station, and townspeople assembled to inspect them – often literally scrutinizing teeth, eyes, and limbs to determine whether a child was sturdy enough for field work or intelligent and mild-tempered enough to cook and clean. Babies and healthy older boys were typically chosen first; older girls were chosen last. After a brief trial period, the children became indentured to their host families. If a child wasn’t chosen, he or she would get back on the train to try again at the next town.

Some children were welcomed by new families and towns. Others were beaten, mistreated, taunted, or ignored. They lost any sense of their cultural identities and backgrounds; siblings were often separated, and contact between them was discouraged. City children were expected to perform hard farm labor for which they were neither emotionally nor physically prepared. Many of them, first-generation immigrants from Italy, Poland, and Ireland, were teased for their strange accents; some barely spoke English. Jealousy and competition in the new families created rifts, and many children ended up feeling that they didn’t belong anywhere. Some drifted from home to home to find someone who wanted them. Many ran away. The Children’s Aid Society did attempt to keep track of these children, but the reality of great distances and spotty record-keeping made this difficult.

I became interested in the story of the orphan trains because my husband’s grandfather, Frank Robertson, was rumored to have been a train rider. It was believed that he traveled on an orphan train from New York to Jamestown, North Dakota with his four siblings when he was ten years old. In the course of researching this family lore, I found that although orphan trains did, in fact, stop in Jamestown, and orphans from these trains were adopted there, the Robertson clan came from Missouri. But my interest was piqued, and I started researching this period in history.

After reading newspaper clippings, I began searching the Web for more information. I found first-person accounts, orphan-train reunion groups, and historical archives. That research led me to New York Public Library, where I found original materials: lists of orphans from foundling hospitals, handwritten records, notes from desperate mothers explaining why they were abandoning their children. I found that approximately 145 orphan train riders are still alive in the United States; orphan-train reunions are still being held in towns across the Midwest. A novel began to take shape in my mind.
My own background is partly Irish, and so I decided that I wanted to write about an Irish girl who has kept silent about the circumstances that led her to the orphan train. “People who cross the threshold between the known world and that place where the impossible does happen discover the problem of how to convey that experience,” Kathryn Harrison writes. Over the course of this novel Vivian moves from shame about her past to acceptance, eventually coming to terms with she’s been through. In the process she learns about the regenerative power of claiming – and telling – one’s own life story.

In *Orphan Train*, Vivian Daly’s first-person, past-tense account of her experience on the orphan train and her journey from Irish-Catholic immigrant to Protestant Midwesterner alternates with the present-day, present-tense, third-person-limited story of Vivian’s life on the Maine coast. (I have quite a bit of experience with this kind of autobiographical narrative, and am intimately familiar with its quirks, subtexts, and possibilities. Some time ago I wrote a nonfiction book with my mother called *The Conversation Begins: Mothers and Daughters Talk about Living Feminism*, for which we interviewed, and created first-person accounts for, more than 60 women.) The present-day story takes place over six weeks; the narrative arc of Vivian’s history encompasses 90 years.

http://bakerkline.wpengine.com/blog/my-next-novel/
The Orphan Trains

An estimated 30,000 children were homeless in New York City in the 1850s.

The children ranged in age from about six to 18 and shared a common grim existence. Homeless or neglected, they lived in New York City's streets and slums with little or no hope of a successful future. Their numbers were large - an estimated 30,000 children were homeless in New York City in the 1850s. Charles Loring Brace, the founder of The Children's Aid Society, believed that there was a way to change the futures of these children. By removing youngsters from the poverty and debauchery of the city streets and placing them in morally upright farm families, he thought they would have a chance of escaping a lifetime of suffering.

He proposed that these children be sent by train to live and work on farms out west. They would be placed in homes for free but they would serve as an extra pair of hands to help with chores around the farm. They wouldn't be indentured. In fact, older children placed by The Children's Aid Society were to be paid for their labors.

The Orphan Train Movement lasted from 1853 to the early 1900s and more than 120,000 children were placed. This ambitious, unusual and controversial social experiment is now recognized as the beginning of the foster care concept in the United States.

Orphan Trains stopped at more than 45 states across the country as well as Canada and Mexico. During the early years, Indiana received the largest number of children. There were numerous agencies nationwide that placed children on trains to go to foster homes. In New York, besides Children's Aid, other agencies that placed children included Children's Village (then known as the New York Juvenile Asylum), what is now New York Foundling Hospital, and the former Orphan Asylum Society of the City of New York, which is now the Graham-Windham Home for Children.

Some of the children struggled in their newfound surroundings, while many others went on to lead simple, very normal lives, raising their families and working towards the American dream. Although records weren't always well kept, some of the children placed in the West went on to great successes. There were two governors, one congressman, one sheriff, two district attorneys, three county commissioners as well as numerous bankers, lawyers, physicians, journalists, ministers, teachers and businessmen.

The Orphan Train Movement and the success of other Children's Aid initiatives led to a host of child welfare reforms, including child labor laws, adoption and the establishment of foster care services, public education, the provision of health care and nutrition and vocational training.

Resources

The last generation of Orphan Train riders is still living in towns across the United States. They keep in touch with each other through the National Orphan Train Complex and through
Children's Aid. Based in Concordia, Kansas, the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America helps members establish and maintain family contacts, retrace their roots and preserve the history of the Orphan Train Movement.

**The Victor Remer Historical Archives of The Children's Aid Society**

Important historical records can be accessed via The Guide to the Records of The Children's Aid Society (1853-1947). This guide contains materials pertaining to emigration programs such as the Orphan Train, foster care and adoption programs operating between 1853-1947, annual reports to 2006, a small collection of materials from 1948-1951, and The Children's Aid Society lodging houses, industrial schools, convalescent homes, health centers and farm schools.

http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/about/history/orphan-trains
The Orphan Train Experience

What was it like to ride the Orphan Trains?

What it was like to ride the orphan trains depends upon when you rode them. Some of the first riders were little better than cattle cars with seats and make-shift bathroom facilities. Later, as more money became available, the riders were able to ride in better cars. The last riders, like my mother, was able to ride in Pullman cars [sleeping cars].

Picture 30 to 40 very young children traveling with two or three adults. These children varied from babies to children in their teenage years. Most of these children had no idea of what was happening to them. They may have been told that they were going out west, but they really had no idea what that meant. Most of them had never been outside of New York City. The children, that were older than babies, often were frightened, sometimes excited over the new views outside the train windows, and often were very confused over what would happen next.

They lost any means of contacting their relatives back in New York. They were never to speak, or think of their families again. They were to completely start over with new families. The older children would remember their old life. The babies would have no memory of life in New York.

When the trains pulled into the stations, the caretakers would get the children cleaned up ready for inspection. The children would climb down the tall train car steps onto the platform, and march to the meeting place. Sometimes this meeting place would be a baggage wagon on the train platform – sometimes it was the local church – sometimes it was the local opera house [what we would call the movie house now]. Almost always, the children were up on a stage of some kind. This because known as being Put Up for Adoption.

Many times the children were inspected like they were livestock. Muscles were felt. Teeth were checked. Sometimes the children would sing or dance trying to attract the attention of new mothers and fathers. It was frightening to have complete strangers looking them over and touching them. If they were lucky, someone chose them. Papers were signed and they went home with their new parents. While a local committee made sure that the new parents were fit to be parents, it was not much of an inspection compared to today.
One of the saddest parts of this procedure was often the new parents could not take more than one child. If brothers and sisters were lucky, they were taken by families in the same area so they could visit. If they were not lucky, brother, or sister, would get back on the train without them and go many miles further down the track. It was not uncommon for brothers and sisters to lose track of each other completely.

**Was life better because of riding the Orphan Trains?**

For the most part, yes. Back in New York City, these children were either living in orphanages, which were little better than military schools, or they were living on the streets trying to support themselves. There was no welfare to help them out. There was little in the way of foster care. Most of their relatives were back in the old country [France, England, Germany, etc.]. As a result, most of the grandparents and uncles and aunts were not here in America to help take care of these children. Many of the children turned to minor crimes in order to get food and shelter. They had no medical help when they were sick. They had little opportunity to make something out of themselves. Most would have either died, or have been put in prison, work houses, etc. While separating the children like this was not the best idea in the world, it was much better than leaving them to their fates in New York City.

On the farms, and towns of the United States, there was room, food, parents, and safety. There was a chance to go to school. They could grow up and become someone of which America could be proud. Many of these children obtained loving homes and parents. I wish I could say that they all did. That simply is not the truth. In some cases, the children were taken in to be farm hands and mothers helpers. Some were taken in to help out in the shops. These children provided cheap labor.

**Would the riders encourage this kind of placing out now?**

Most would not. The Orphan Train Movement was the beginning of children’s rights. From the trains came the children’s protection laws, school lunches, medical treatments, and the beginnings of the welfare system.

Today’s system tries to keep the children with their birth parents. If that is not possible, local foster parents are provided. Where possible, brothers and sisters are kept together. There is
now a safety net to help protect the children. Would the riders prefer to go back to the old system? No! They realize that the new system is not perfect – that it needs fixing – but it is better than breaking up families.

The Orphan Trains were needed at the time they happened. They were not the best answer, but they were the first attempts at finding a practical system. Many children that would have died, lived to have children and grandchildren. It has been calculated that over two million descendants have come from these children. The trains gave the children a fighting chance to grow up.

Written by D. Bruce Ayler
Orphan Train Rider Descendant

http://orphantraindepot.org/history/the-orphan-train-experience/