READER RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Section 1 – Pages 1-23

Who is speaking in the prologue? What role did the ghosts play in their life?

What are the basics of Molly’s situation? Do you sympathize with her?

Section 2 – Pages 24-55

Dutchy has a very particular idea about the orphan train and what will happen to the kids on it. Do you agree with him?

Why does Vivian have so much stuff? And why does she avoid modern technology?

Section 3 – Pages 56-82

In her placement with Mrs. Byrne, Niamh gets the advice that “you got to learn to take what people are willing to give.” (77) Do you think this is good advice? What might the downsides be?

Section 4 – Pages 83-112

Why does Vivian pry into the details of Molly’s life? Why does Molly react to that the way that she does? Who do you think is in the right?

Why do you think Mr. and Mrs. Byrne act the way that they do? Is her behavior – and especially his – excusable in the name of trying to survive?

How has Niamh/Dorothy changed her own behavior or her identity to survive? At the end of the section, she says she feels that she is “retreating” (112). Is this healthy or dangerous?

Section 5 – Pages 113-138

How do the Grotes compare to the Brynes? Has Niamh’s/Dorothy’s situation improved or gotten worse?

Why does Molly wear a nose ring? Why isn’t she in a hurry to put it back in? What might this reveal about her changing mindset?

What choice does the social worker present to Molly?

What’s the assignment given to Molly in school? In what ways does the assignment relate to Vivian – and to Molly?

Section 6 – Pages 139-167
Why does Niamh/Dorothy avoid telling Miss Larsen what’s wrong at home?

Why does Miss Larsen choose to intervene, even when she said earlier she can’t take a child home with her?

Section 7 – Pages 169-199

Why does Vivian reference Macbeth when her stories start pouring out of her? “Who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?” Why is her telling the story of her life like killing a person?

Why did the “experience of emotion” (170) stop coming naturally to Vivian?

Why does Molly speak up in the defense of Native Americans in class? How does it go?

Why does Molly snap at Jack when he questions what’s she’s up to with Vivian (174)? Why does his comment get to the heart of her life situation?

Vivian says that the first 23 years of her life are the ones that shaped her – and the rest of them are irrelevant. Do you think a person can actually experience their life in this way?

Why does Niamh/Dorothy agree to take the name Vivian? Do you agree with her choice?

Section 8 – Pages 200-236

Why does Vivian decide to avoid getting in trouble with the Nielsens? In what way does this make her different from other teens her age?

What finally makes Molly decide to pack up and leave? Why can’t Ralph talk her out of it? How does he compare to Mr. Byrne?

Why do you think Molly decides to reveal to Vivian that her sister Maisie was alive all of these years?

Why is Vivian so comfortable around Dutchy, despite the fact that she has practically no romantic experience?

Section 9 – Pages 237-273

After Dutchy dies, Vivian says that she’s learned what it is to lose everything, and that “it must be my lot in life to be taught that lesson over and over again.” Do you agree with her viewpoint on fate?

Do you think Vivian makes the right choice in giving away her daughter?

Why do you think Vivian opens herself up to technology and contact at the very end of the story?
Reading Group Guide Questions (provided by the publisher)

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, Bunn 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?