



White Oleander

by Janet Fitch

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Discussion Questions

1. Describe the relationship between Astrid and Ingrid early in the book. Why was Astrid fearful her mother would "fly away" if she mentioned she would have enjoyed having a father, summer camp, a Y program, or summer school?
2. Astrid said, "My mother was not the least bit curious about me." (p. 10) How do you think that made this twelve year-old feel? What do you think that does to a child to come to that realization?
3. Why does Astrid express herself through her paintings and drawings versus words? Discuss the symbolism of the wildfires and Astrid's coming of age, her desires, and her feelings?
4. Compare the characteristics of the white oleander to Ingrid. Then draw a comparison to the type of mother she was, and the type of prisoner she was. Can you compare any characteristics of the white oleander to Astrid?
5. Ingrid said in a passage "Isn't it funny, I'm enjoying my hatred so much more than I ever enjoyed love." (p. 34) How does this come back to haunt her?
6. Astrid takes a few of her mother's things before the child welfare people take her away. What is the significance of the ex-acto knife? Of the kimono? What solace or strength do they offer her?
7. Although Astrid tells Paul "I don't let anyone touch me" (p.265), discuss how Claire touched her. Did others touch her as well? What is it about her experiences with people that make her feel this way? Discuss the powerful ways in which Astrid touched other people.
8. Why would Astrid choose Rena as her new foster mother versus Bill and Ann Greenway? Was she in some way trying to punish herself? Why did she feel she deserved Rena?
9. Discuss the various letters from mother to daughter, especially the one on page 303. At what point did Astrid start to pull away from her mother emotionally? At what point was she snapped back?
10. Referring to her relationship with Ray, Astrid said, "I was the snake in the garden" (p.93). How does this phrase relate to Marvel, Claire and Rena?
11. Why does Astrid wait several hours before alerting Ron to Claire's death? What in Astrid died at the same time?
12. Discuss Astrid's view of men. How does Ray compare to Ron? Does she blame men for the bad things that happen to women? Are women merely pawns in a man's world? How does she rise above this?
13. Why do you think Astrid always found herself in the position of caregiver to Starr's children, Marvel's children, and Claire when she was so deeply in need of care herself?
14. Life presents us with important lessons to be learned. What was the ultimate life lesson Astrid learned in her teenage journey? Why would she consider, and desire, a new life with her mother, yet not return to her in the end?