

They Came Like Swallows

By William Maxwell

1. Did Maxwell draw realistic male and female characters? Which character could you relate to best and why? What about the secondary characters: Sophie, Karl, Irene, Edith or Clara? Did any stand out for you?
2. Maxwell tells the story through three voices: Bunny, Robert, & James. How did this affect the story and your appreciation of the book? How do you think it might have been different if Elizabeth or Irene told a section of the story??
3. If any, what characteristics of Maxwell's writing did you enjoy? Did his writing style distract from or enhance the story? What are your favorite passages or observations? Was the dialogue realistic sounding? Was there a rhythm to the authors style, or anything else that might be considered unique about it?
4. How did Maxwell use description in the book? Would you consider his style fairly descriptive or more sparse? Was he better at describing the concrete or the abstract?
5. What was more important, the characters or the plot? Was the plot moved forward by decisions of the characters, or were the characters at the mercy of the plot? What events in the story stand out for you as memorable? Was there foreshadowing and suspense or did the author give things away at the beginning of the book? How did it affect your enjoyment of the book?
6. Injury, illness and death are a common theme throughout the book: Roberts, amputation, Elizabeth's difficult labors, her father's slow and painful death, and each character that contracted the flu. Some of them take place in the past and others as the story progresses. How does this theme relate to the overall message of the book? Do you think it's hopeful or depressing?
7. What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book? What will be your most vivid memories of it a year from now? Or will it just leave a vague impression, and what will that be?
8. In the beginning of Book Three, James makes an observation that if he'd come across himself on the street, he would think "that poor fellow is done for." Do you think he's "done for" after the death of his wife? What do you think happens to him and his sons after the story ends?