

READING GROUP GUIDE

This Time Might Be Different: Stories of Maine
Written by Elaine Ford
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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

General questions to begin the discussion

Do you recognize the Maine depicted in these stories? Other than physical location, what makes this book specific to Maine, in your opinion? Can you imagine any of these stories set somewhere else?

This Time Might Be Different shows considerable bad behavior: deception, lying, adultery, stalking, theft, home invasion, assault, threatening with a dangerous weapon. Is such conduct common in Maine? If not, why is there so much of it in these stories?

What does the title *This Time Might Be Different* lead you to expect, as a reader? Is the title appropriate for these stories?

The stories were conceived and written individually, often years apart. Elaine Ford was not thinking about how they would look grouped together. Does the collection have unity and coherence? Do you find recurring themes in the stories?

The Depth of Winter

What role does the wreath factory play in the story?

Compare Kori's first and second visits to Pete's trailer.

Entering the trailer the second time, Kori feels "the way you feel going into the fun house at the Millettsville Fair." What's in her mind in this last paragraph of the story?

How important is winter in the story?

Are you satisfied by the ending?

Suicide

Why do you think the author tells the story in Lynette's voice?

"Don't cry for me but it will be too late, I'm heading out to cross the final gate." Did Lynette write the words on the paper that John Scarano picked up? What might this writing be, other than suicidal thoughts?

Is Scarano altruistic, merely a good Samaritan trying to prevent a suicide?

Why does Lynette steal the ivory carving?

When Lynette discovers the writer's trailer empty and abandoned, she feels "kind of sick to my stomach." Why?

Why does she throw the ivory carving into the ocean?

In the Marrow

What appeals to Amy about Jack? What appeals to Jack about Amy?

Is there a single turning point in Amy and Jack's relationship? If so, what?

Do you feel empathy for Jack?

In the final paragraph, Amy, as seen by Jack, is "as sealed and self-contained as an egg.... He was no longer real to her" and she is unreachable by him. How do you interpret the ending? Has Amy escaped Jack and become her own person or has she been (re)captured by her grandmother?

Bent Reeds

Why do you think Millard decides to move out of his house?

Why does Millard reject Owen's garage-sale offer for the bunk beds? Yet at the end he leaves them for Owen. What changes?

How do you interpret the title, "Bent Reeds"?

Have you experienced a situation where, with no real wrongdoing on either part, friends somehow fell out and could not be reconciled?

Elwood's Last Job

Do you think Elwood is as simple as people in town think?

Why does Elwood rob the laundromat rather than a bank or store?

How does the author make us laugh at a story about an armed robbery?

Is this story about long-suffering Elwood getting even?

What, if anything, do Mandy, Rena, and Mrs. Balch learn from this experience?

Demons

Why does the author organize this story back to front, with the most recent events shown first? Do you think chronological order would be an improvement?

Is this a story of actions and consequences? What action (or actions), with what consequences?

Should the title be taken literally? Which characters, if any, have to deal with demons and what are those demons like?

Whom among the characters do you sympathize or empathize with? Whom not?

Button, Needle, Thread

How do these three inconsequential objects alter Anne's life?

Does Terry change during the course of the story, or is it only Anne's attitude toward him that changes?

Do you find Anne's growing focus on Derek, her former student, believable?

Besides the mystery of who is intruding into Anne's apartment, what else is this story about?

Have you ever had an unexplained occurrence seem like a personal message or an insight into your life?

Fire Escape

Wally seems comfortable in his solitude—at first. What changes for him?
What do we really know about the young woman with the cat?
Does Wally want something from her? If so, what?
What are various ways the title “Fire Escape” can be read?
Does Wally remind you of anyone you’ve known or read about?

Dragon Palaces

“Neither of [Laurie’s] children is turning out the way she expected.” In what ways? How significant is this in Laurie’s life?
Nicola is Steve’s friend, not Laurie’s, and it seems Nicola invited herself to visit. What’s Nicola’s game?
How would you characterize Laurie and Steve’s relationship?
After Helen’s accident, Nicola is shown the door. What lies ahead for Steve and Laurie?
Have you ever had a houseguest whom you disliked but felt unable to banish?

Why Men Love to Cut Things Down

How are the two women alike/different? How about the two men? How are the couples’ relationships alike/different?
Why won’t Nancy answer Gina’s request for advice about her marriage?
Is Don and Nancy’s marriage in trouble?
When Gina calls Brock an asshole and pours wine on him, does he deserve it? Or is Gina responding to other things than Brock’s conduct at dinner?
Do Gina and Brock remind you of any couples you know?

Junk

Why won’t Lyle tell Frances his plan?
Talking to Bev, what does Frances at first think is the explanation for Lyle’s odd behavior?
What eventually changes Lyle’s mind about the envisioned new way to make a living?
You have a plan for some new undertaking, and you’re enthusiastic. You make elaborate preparations. Then you realize the plan is unrealistic or unworkable, or it arouses in you an unanticipated emotional reaction. Has this ever happened to you?

Millennium Fever

Why does Carlene hide from Dana when he reappears after forty years? What changes her mind?
In the church, considering Dana’s invitation to leave with him, Carlene thinks, “My last chance at true happiness, Lord. What shall I do?” What does she decide?
It turns out Chalkie has known about Carlene and Dana, and said nothing, because “I’d better let you get whatever it was out of your system.” Do you think better or worse of Chalkie for this?
What does the future hold for Carlene, Chalkie, and Dana?

Original Brasses, Fine Patina

What does Helen really want to get out of this meeting at the museum?

“I assumed the idea [of our meeting] was for us to wish each other Godspeed, or something of the sort.” Is Cal sincere or is he merely trying to smooth over the argument of the moment?

Cal denies he has health problems. Does he?

Cal says, “If you do establish contact with [the man who is our son], I’d rather you didn’t mention me. At this point I can’t afford...” What can’t Cal afford?

“She lays her hand on his, just for a second. ‘Don’t worry. I won’t betray you. Our son will never know who you are.’” The pair have achieved détente, and they part civilly. Do you find irony in these lines? If so, explain.

From Away

What’s attractive about Stan, for Clara? What’s attractive about Clara, for Stan?

Do Clara’s expectations change during the course of the story?

How important is the setting to this story?

Do Stan and Clara have a future together?

The Rock As Big As the Queen Mary

Meeting again after twenty-seven years, what are Meg and Peter’s expectations?

In the story, marriage is characterized as a contractual arrangement, with businesslike obligations. Peter accepts that his wife’s right to her career is “part and parcel of our bargain,” even if it means they live apart. Meg considers splitting with her husband over his infidelities—until he is diagnosed with a grave illness. “After that,” she tells Peter, “there was no question of divorce.” Is this terminology accurate to marriage as you understand it? Do you think more or less of Peter and Meg for honoring their respective “bargains”? Do they in fact honor their bargains?

What does Peter mean when he tells Jim, “I did it for you”?

Explain the choice of title for this story. Of what might the large rock be symbolic?

General questions to conclude the discussion

What is Elaine Ford’s attitude toward her characters? Approving? Disapproving? Neutral?

Do the characters achieve the “different,” or change, that many of them crave?

What appeals to you most in Ford’s writing? Characters? Plot development? Descriptions? Other?

Which story speaks loudest to you?

In your own life, have you ever had a *This Time Might Be Different* moment?