



White Oleander

A Novel

by Janet Fitch

Reading Group Guide

- Describe the relationship between Astrid and Ingrid early in the book. Why was Astrid fearful that her mother would "fly away" if she mentioned her desires - such as having a father, or going to summer camp or a YMCA program?
- Astrid chooses to express herself through painting and drawing, rather than through writing. Why do you think Astrid preferred these forms of creative expression? Which do you prefer?
- Compare the characteristics of the white oleander to those of Ingrid. Do the same with Astrid.
- Ingrid said, "Isn't it funny. I'm enjoying my hatred so much more than I ever enjoyed love" (p. 34). How did this statement come back to haunt her?
- Before the social service agency takes Astrid away, she packs up a few of her mother's possessions to take with her. What is the significance of the ex-acto knife? Of the kimono?
- Astrid tells Paul, "I don't let anyone touch me" (p. 265). Discuss how Claire touched Astrid. When and how else was Astrid touched by others? Discuss the powerful ways in which Astrid touched other people.
- Why did Astrid choose Rena as her new foster mother over Bill and Ann Greenway? Was Astrid trying to punish herself in some way? Why did she feel she deserved Rena?
- Discuss Ingrid's letters to Astrid. At what point did Astrid begin to pull away from her mother emotionally? At what point did this change?
- 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?
- Why did Astrid wait several hours before alerting Ron to Claire's death? In what ways did Astrid also die?
- Discuss Astrid's view of men. How did Ray compare to Ron? Did Astrid blame men for the bad things that happened to women?
- Why do you think Astrid so often found herself in the position of caregiver--to Starr's children, to Marvel's children, and to Claire--when she was so deeply in need of care herself?
- What was the ultimate life lesson Astrid learned in this coming-of-age journey? How did she triumph? Why would Astrid consider, and desire, a new life with her mother, yet not return to her in the end?