

WESTERING WOMEN

Discussion Questions

1. A variety of women sign up for the 2,000-mile trip to Goosetown to find husbands. They include a runaway wife, a minister's wife, a prostitute, a farmer, an abused woman, and a jilted bride, among others. Which of the women do you relate to most and why?
2. Suppose you were an unmarried woman in the 1850s. Could you have left behind family, friends, and virtually everything you own to travel over prairie and through mountains to marry a man you'd never met? Why would a woman of that time have made such a commitment?
3. In the mid-nineteenth century, women had few rights. Their husbands controlled their earnings, their property, their children, even their bodies. How would you have coped with those times?
4. Not all the women who sign up for the journey complete it. Several drop out. At what point would you have gone home, or would you have continued all the way to California?
5. After the initial meeting at the church, Maggie cannot go home and has no place to stay. What would have happened to her if Mary did not take her in? What were her options?
6. There were few employment opportunities open to women in the 1850s, and almost none paid a living wage. Many women had to take back-breaking jobs such as laundress and domestic worker to support themselves and often their children. Can you blame Sadie for turning to prostitution?
7. The Indians in the book are seen through the eyes of 1850s travelers, who believed them to be inferior human beings. Is it fair to portray them that way when such views today are considered racist?
8. Mary quickly becomes the leader of the women. They love her and look up to her. Would the women have made it to California without her? How would the trip have been different? Would Mary have made the journey if she had known she would not complete it?
9. A critical point in the overland journey comes at City of Rocks, where all the men except for the two ministers desert the wagon train. Should the women have turned back to winter at Salt Lake City or should they have continued the trek?
10. Maggie purposely does not ask about the mother and father of Wash, the baby given to Mary and her at Forty-Mile Desert. Nor does she mention the initials inside the mother's wedding ring. Should Wash have had the opportunity one day to find her birth family?
11. In the beginning, Reverend Parnell is the leader of the expedition. At what point does Reverend Swain take over and why?
12. Although the Goosetown men bring wagons and offer to escort the travelers into town, the women refuse. Why did they insist on finishing the journey on their own?
13. If *Westering Women* were made into a movie, who would you pick to play the various women?

