

Discussion Questions

Once There Were Wolves by Charlotte McConaghy

1. Inti and Aggie are identical twins. How does that shape their bond? Discuss their particular intimacy, specifically how it is affected by Aggie's marriage to Gus. How do the sisters both protect each other and hurt each other?
2. Discuss Inti's mirror-touch synesthesia. How does Inti's relationship with it shift over the years? How does it influence the way she exists in the world?
3. Inti's parents are incredibly different, in both lifestyle and outlook. How do they each shape Inti's worldview? How does her understanding of her parents change over the course of the novel?
4. As a child, Inti considered the forest near her father's home in British Columbia to be her "true home, the place we belonged. A landscape that made sense of me. As a child I believed the trees of this forest our family." Why does Inti feel such kinship with the forest? What does she find in nature that she struggles to find among other humans?
5. Inti describes the wolves as "all I have left that isn't rage." What is she angry about? How does her anger both fuel her and hold her back? How does her anger compare to the anger that fuels men like Gus and Stuart?
6. At a meeting with the local community to discuss the Cairngorms Wolf Project, Inti tells the crowd, "If you truly think wolves are the blood spillers, then you're blind. We do that. We are the people killers, the children killers. We're the monsters." What does she mean? Did this novel change your view of wolves in any way? If so, how?
7. Language is a major theme in the novel. As Inti says, "There are languages without words and violence is one of them." How is violence a language for these characters? What other languages shape Inti's and Aggie's lives?
8. Why does Inti decide to bury Stuart's body? Do you sympathize with her decision? What do you think would have happened if she had reported it instead?

9. Inti tells Duncan, “No such thing as trust in the wilderness.... It’s only people need that word.” What does she mean? What, for Inti, are the differences between wolf society and human society?
10. Mrs. Doyle tells Inti, “When you open your heart to rewilding a landscape, the truth is, you’re opening your heart to rewilding yourself.” What does “rewilding” mean here? How does the idea of rewilding both the Highlands and the characters themselves resonate throughout the novel, specifically for Inti?
11. Near the end of the novel, Inti questions her work with the wolves: “I began to wonder if what we were doing was right. If our involvement in their lives was too much. We were trying to save them but we killed them sometimes, too. We stomped through the world and crumpled things where we walked, too human, not creature enough.” What do you think? What are the benefits and drawbacks of the work Inti and her team are doing to reintroduce the wolves, and to conservation in general?
12. When Inti asks Lainey if she’s glad Stuart is gone, she replies, “He was my best friend and I loved him and I’ve been a ghost for years. Of course, I’m glad he’s gone.” What are the contradictions of their marriage? How does the domestic abuse Lainey suffers compare to Aggie’s? How does Stuart compare to Gus?
13. In explaining why she killed Stuart, Aggie tells Inti, “I was so tired of feeling afraid...I didn’t want that prison for you, too.” What does she mean? Do you sympathize with her actions over the course of the novel?
14. How are both Inti and Duncan broken at the beginning of the novel? How do they help each other heal and, as they say, save each other?
15. When she takes her dad and sister on a road trip to see wolves, Inti reflects, “. . . whether we saw them or not they made this place richer and more alive just by existing. I could feel them, and I was glad as the Wyoming sun set purple, pink, and gold over the prairie that the wolves had remained hidden, that their lives were their own, their mystery remained.” What does she mean? Why are Inti and her father both so drawn to what they call, “the infinite mystery of wolves”? How do you understand that mystery?

(Questions from Flatiron Books Reading Group Guide)