

THE BOAT HOUSE CAFÉ
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Eudora Welty, in her essay “On Place in Fiction,” wrote, “The truth is, fiction depends for its life on place.” How important is the setting of *The Boat House Café* to your understanding of the story? How do the wildness and isolation of Innisfree shape Mae’s perception of herself and her relationships—with Tobias, with her customers and with the town?
2. The once vibrant culture of the Wampanoag was nearly invisible on Chappaquiddick by World War II. Even as a child in the 1920s, Mae had barely been aware of the tribe, except to avoid the burial ground on North Neck. How does her understanding of the Wampanoag evolve and why is it so uncomfortable for her initially?
3. Although Mae’s life in New York was deeply unsatisfying—“a necessity, not a choice”—at one point after her return to Chappaquiddick she wishes for the anonymity she once had in the city. Given the insular nature of island society and the expectations for sexual morality in the 1940s, was Mae’s decision to defend Tobias brave or reckless? Would you have spoken up for him?
4. The keeping of secrets is an important theme in the story—Mae’s shame in the life that took her so far from her mother’s expectation that she would enter the convent; Tobias’ reluctance to reveal to Mae his previous marriage; Mae’s withholding of her pregnancy. How do these secrets impair the relationship between Mae and Tobias?
5. Do you agree with Mae’s decision to keep her pregnancy from Tobias so that he will take on the leadership of the tribe? Do you think any other motives colored her choice to raise her baby alone?
6. Do you think Mae was justified in not returning to her family or letting them know she was alive? After she was reunited with Kathleen, should she have reconciled with her family?
7. What did you think of Sadie’s rigid attitude against Tobias marrying Mae? Could you understand or sympathize with her position?
8. The nature and meaning of family ties is another theme in the novel. How does Mae, so determined to survive alone without help, come to an understanding of her own need for connection? What are some of the different forms of “family” that emerge over the course of the story?