



FIVE WIVES

JOAN THOMAS

BOOK CLUB GUIDE

1. *Five Wives* is based on real events that took place in Ecuador in the mid-1950s. Did any readers in your group know about Operation Auca before reading the novel? If so, how does the account in *Five Wives* differ from your previous impressions?
2. A quick internet search will lead you to the photos found in Nate Saint's camera after he died, as well as to the portraits Cornell Capa took of Betty, Mary, and Olive. Before or after reading *Five Wives*, did you go online and take a look at pictures, or did you stick with your own mental images? If you checked out photos, how did what you saw correspond to what you had imagined?
3. The missionaries in *Five Wives* expend a lot of energy trying to discern God's will. What other personal motives do you see in their burning desire to reach the Waorani? Do you see differences in what drives Jim, Nate, Peter, and Roger?
4. The author enters the point of view of three of the wives: Olive, Marj, and Betty. Who do you sympathize with most? Which of these women comes closest to seeing the full implications of what they are doing? Which one acts with the most autonomy? Focussing on Marj, what do you see in her heart and mind that makes her uncomfortable with the mission? Can you suggest a way for her out of this dilemma?
5. In actuality, Elisabeth Elliot (1926–2015) was an influential writer and a respected speaker in Evangelical Christianity. Describe her character as *Five Wives* portrays her. Is she self-aware? Does she change and grow? How do you understand her emotional journey after Jim's death and her decision to take her tiny daughter into the Waorani settlement?



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6. Marj looks at her husband Nate and thinks, “It’s not something you can resist, the iron engine of your childhood. It drives you forward until the day you die. Nate has a wife and three kids, but his new family is ghostly compared with his old” (p. 205). Do you agree with Marj about the primacy of childhood experiences?

Consider this question with respect to Rachel. In Chapter 28, Fidel gives a damning account of Rachel’s impact on the Waorani community. Do you see the roots of her adult behaviour in her early experiences, or do you see other factors at play?

7. Midstream in a story set in Ecuador, *Five Wives* takes us into the life of a Manhattan photojournalist grieving the recent death of his brother, the famous photographer Robert Capa. Why do you think the author chose to adopt an outsider’s point of view at this crucial juncture in the novel? What does Cornell Capa bring to the novel?

8. *Five Wives* includes a contemporary thread, chapters that imagine the experience of fictional descendents of the missionaries. Did these chapters deepen your understanding of the events of the 1950s? Conversely, does the story of Operation Auca cast light on current attitudes in evangelicalism and in North American society?

9. The end of *Five Wives* sees David brooding over a drink in a Quito restaurant and Abby lying on the trampoline in her dad’s backyard. Which of them has travelled further (emotionally and in their understanding) in the course of the novel? How do you imagine their reunion and their relationship in the days to come? What particular challenges do parents and children face when families subscribe to a specific set of beliefs?

10. Abby says, “Dayuma’s story—wouldn’t it be amazing to hear that?” (p. 375). Joan Thomas writes in the Author’s Note that she made a deliberate choice not to enter the points of view of Indigenous characters in this story. Discuss the principles that you think should govern such decisions for artists and writers.



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11. The epigraph to *Five Wives* is a line from anthropologist Tim Ingold: “There is no point at which the story ends and life begins.” How do you understand this sentiment? What examples do you see in *Five Wives* of people mythologizing their experience? Think of stories you or your family tell that have evolved over time and are more meaningful to you than a strictly factual account. This human tendency to turn experience into narrative—does it have a valuable function? Does it have a downside for individuals and for societies? What role do competing narratives play in contemporary politics?

12. Even people who don’t support the goals of religious foreign missions often describe missionaries as “well-meaning.” After reading *Five Wives*, do you think this word reflects the point of view of the novel?

In the spring of 2019 the Waorani won a court victory to protect a huge section of their traditional lands from further oil expansion. You might be interested in learning more about Waorani activism through websites like <https://waoresist.amazonfrontlines.org/>.

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