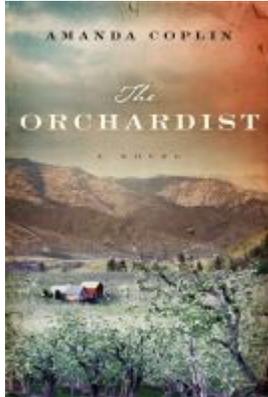


Oliver Wolcott Library
The Orchardist by Amanda Coplin
Book Discussion Guide
Prepared by Patricia Moore



About the Book:

At the turn of the 20th century in a rural stretch of the Pacific Northwest, a reclusive orchardist, Talmadge, tends to apples and apricots as if they were loved ones. A gentle man, he's found solace in the sweetness of the fruit he grows and the quiet, beating heart of the land he cultivates. One day, two teenage girls appear and steal his fruit from the market and later return to the outskirts of his orchard to see the man who gave them no chase. Feral, scared, and very pregnant, the girls take up on Talmadge's land and indulge in his deep reservoir of compassion. Just as the girls begin to trust him, men arrive in the orchard with guns, and the shattering tragedy that follows will set Talmadge on an irrevocable course not only to save and protect but to reconcile the ghosts of his own troubled past.

Transcribing America as it once was before railways and roads connected its corners, Coplin has woven a tapestry of solitary souls who come together in the wake of unspeakable cruelty and misfortune. She writes with breathtaking precision and empathy, and in *The Orchardist* has crafted an astonishing debut novel about a man who disrupts the lonely harmony of an ordered life when he opens his heart and lets the world in.

Source: ReadingGroupGuides.com

About the Author:

Amanda Coplin was born in Wenatchee, Washington. She received her BA from the University of Oregon and MFA from the University of Minnesota. A recipient of residencies from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts, and the Omi International Arts Center at Ledig House in Ghent, New York, she lives in Portland, Oregon.

Source: HarperCollins.com (USA)

Book Reviews:

"THE ORCHARDIST is a stunning accomplishment, hypnotic in its storytelling power, by turns lyrical and gritty, and filled with marvels. Coplin displays a dazzling sense of craftsmanship, and a talent for creating characters vivid and true." — *Jane Ciabattari, NPR*

“Eloquent, moving...an immensely affecting first novel...Coplin refuses to sentimentalize. Instead, she demonstrates that courage and compassion can transform unremarkable lives and redeem damaged souls.” — *Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“When you pick up *THE ORCHARDIST*, you will be lured at first by the lushness of the language. But soon enough the characters will take hold of you and you’ll read on hungrily, as if under a spell. It’s hard to believe that this is Amanda Coplin’s first novel.” — *Wally Lamb, New York Times bestselling author of THE HOUR I FIRST BELIEVED*

“[A] beautiful, powerful novel...*THE ORCHARDIST* has the sweep and scope of a big historical novel...yet Coplin is exquisitely attuned to small, interior revolutions as well. Its language as rooted and plain as the apple trees Talmadge nurtures, this is a gorgeous first book.” — *Boston Globe*

Discussion Questions:

1. How would you describe William Talmadge, the title character of *The Orchardist*? What adjective best describes his character? What are the factors that have shaped the man he is?
2. Though he is mostly alone, Talmadge has two good friends, the herbalist Caroline Middey and the Indian horse catcher Clee, What draws these three people together?
3. When Talmadge first meets the young sisters, Della and Jane, they are stealing his fruit. Why isn't he angry with them? Why does he want to help them? What does he see in them that others might not?
4. Jane told Della that their unborn children were a gift. "They were blessed, said Jane. "It would be themselves they give birth to, only better. That was why she and Della must work so hard to protect them, their children. In protecting the children, Jane and Della would save themselves." Why does Jane tell Della this?
5. Talk about the sisters and the bond they share. Could most people survive the pain and shame of what they were forced to endure? What propels Jane's definitive act? What stops Della from following her? How do these choices reverberate in the years and events that follow?
6. Explore Della's character. Is she a good person? What drives her restlessness? Why is she driven by revenge? Why can't she find solace with Talmadge and Angelene in the orchard?
7. If he could articulate it, how would Talmadge define his relationship to Della? Do you think he thought of himself as Angelene's father? What about Angelene? Though he adored Angelene, "the emotion—the severity of it—also made him afraid." What was the root of Talmadge's fear? Why can love be simultaneously wondrous and terrifying?
8. Is there anything Talmadge could have—should have—done to keep Della with him and Angelene in the orchard? What hold did Della have on him? Did his concern for Della and his longing for her overshadow his relationship with Angelene?
9. Discuss Angelene and Della. How do they view one another? What kind of person does Angelene grow up to be? How might her life have been different if Della had been present?

10. Could you live as Talmadge did? Do you think he was lonely? Did he enjoy his solitude? What about Caroline, Clee, Della, Angelene? Were they lonely? How is being alone different from being lonely?

11. Talmadge insists that Della should return to the Orchard for Angelene. Caroline questions this. "Do they want each other? Does Angelene even want her, Talmadge?" she asks. He replies. "It doesn't matter what we want. It's blood." How important is blood to family? Are Talmadge, Angelene, and even Caroline a family? Would Talmadge agree with your assessment? What about Angelene and Caroline? What ties individuals together as family? Though they themselves cannot define it, what do each of these characters need from the other—including Della?

12. Late in the novel, Talmadge watches Angelene working in the cabin. "She was the dream of the place that bore her and she did not even know it." Explain what he means

13. What is the significance of the landscape and the natural world in the novel? How does it relate to and shape the characters and the lives they lead? Can you think of some other books for which landscape is integral to the story? In the century since the novel's setting, we have built over much of our farmland and open spaces. How has this affected us as individuals and as a society? What have we gained? What's been lost?

Further Reading:

The Light Between Oceans by M.L. Stedman

After four harrowing years on the Western Front, Tom Sherbourne returns to Australia and takes a job as the lighthouse keeper on Janus Rock, nearly half a day's journey from the coast. To this isolated island, where the supply boat comes once a season, Tom brings a young, bold, and loving wife, Isabel. Years later, after two miscarriages and one stillbirth, the grieving Isabel hears a baby's cries on the wind. A boat has washed up onshore carrying a dead man and a living baby.

My Antonia by Willa Cather

My Antonia is considered one of the most significant American novels of the twentieth century. Set during the great migration west to settle the plains of the North American continent, the narrative follows Antonia Shimerda, a pioneer who comes to Nebraska as a child and grows with the country, inspiring a childhood friend, Jim Burden, to write her life story. The novel is important both for its literary aesthetic and as a portrayal of important aspects of American social ideals and history, particularly the centrality of migration to American culture.

Serena by Ron Rash

The year is 1929, and newlyweds George and Serena Pemberton travel from Boston to the North Carolina mountains where they plan to create a timber empire. Although George has already lived in the camp long enough to father an illegitimate child, Serena is new to the mountains – but she soon shows herself to be the equal of any man, overseeing crews, hunting rattlesnakes, even saving her husband's life in the wilderness. Together this lord and lady of the woodlands ruthlessly kill or vanquish all who fall out of favor. Yet when Serena learns that she will never bear a child, she sets out to murder the son George fathered without her.

Snow Falling on Cedars by David Guterson

San Pedro Island, north of Puget Sound, is a place so isolated that no one who lives there can afford to make enemies. But in 1954 a local fisherman is found suspiciously drowned, and a Japanese American

named Kabuo Miyamoto is charged with his murder. In the course of the ensuing trial, it becomes clear that what is at stake is more than a man's guilt. For on San Pedro, memory grows as thickly as cedar trees and the fields of ripe strawberries—memories of a charmed love affair between a white boy and the Japanese girl who grew up to become Kabuo's wife; memories of land desired, paid for, and lost. Above all, San Pedro is haunted by the memory of what happened to its Japanese residents during World War II, when an entire community was sent into exile while its neighbors watched.

The Story of Edgar Sawtelle: A Novel by David Wroblewski

Born mute, speaking only in sign, Edgar Sawtelle leads an idyllic life with his parents on their farm in remote northern Wisconsin. For generations, the Sawtelles have raised and trained a fictional breed of dog whose thoughtful companionship is epitomized by Almondine, Edgar's lifelong friend and ally. But with the unexpected return of Claude, Edgar's paternal uncle, turmoil consumes the Sawtelles' once peaceful home. When Edgar's father dies suddenly, Claude insinuates himself into the life of the farm—and into Edgar's mother's affections.

The Whistling Season by Ivan Doig

"Can't cook but doesn't bite." So begins the newspaper ad offering the services of an "A-1 housekeeper, sound morals, exceptional disposition" that draws the attention of widower Oliver Milliron in the fall of 1909. That unforgettable season deposits the ever-whistling Rose Llewellyn and her font-of-knowledge brother, Morris Morgan, in Marias Coulee along with a stampede of homesteaders drawn by the promise of the Big Ditch—a gargantuan irrigation project intended to make the Montana prairie bloom.

~This book discussion guide including the further reading recommendation list was prepared by the Oliver Wolcott Library.