

Discussion Questions for *The Madstone* by Elizabeth Crook

Spoiler Alert: Discussion questions to be read after finishing the novel

1. When Nell shoots her husband, Benjamin remarks, “I am no stranger to death, having seen it on many occasions.” That being the case, why does this death rattle Benjamin?
2. Early in their journey, Benjamin has a dark dream. On waking, he feels that “the scanty portions of knowledge I had learned from within books, of how I might live and do right, was all just pennies put in a jar and spilled out and emptied.” What does he mean by that? What might this dream indicate about his morals? In what ways could the dream be interpreted as an omen for what lies ahead?
3. The bond between Nell and Benjamin forms almost immediately. Soon, Benjamin is eager to take great risks for her. Is it simply love at first sight, or does something deeper draw them together?
4. How do the complex dynamics between white, Black, and Indigenous people play a role in the story? In what ways do these dynamics shape the characters, especially Horhay?
5. How do Nell’s experiences with domestic violence affect her identity and values?
6. What is your opinion of how Nell deals with the violence of her husband and the Swamp Fox gang? Should she have reported the crimes of her husband and others sooner? Is she culpable in any of the violence they committed?
7. Much of the journey takes place on the unforgiving Texas prairie, and the crew largely survives due to the small kindnesses of others. Yet we also see extreme acts of violence on the trail. How does this harsh landscape itself act as a character in the novel? How does it both drive people apart and bring people together?
8. Is Empress Carlota’s necklace in fact cursed, or is the string of bad luck merely coincidental?
9. After Silas dies and Murry is grievously injured, Benjamin reflects: “Despite we had won victories in the passage of that day, I felt profoundly lost in the course of the night. I could not help but wonder what Murry must feel, laid out alongside his dead brother.” Why might Benjamin still feel conflicted over the brothers’ fates, despite everything he knows about them and their sordid actions?
10. Why does Benjamin write the letter to Tot? What comfort is his story intended to provide?

