

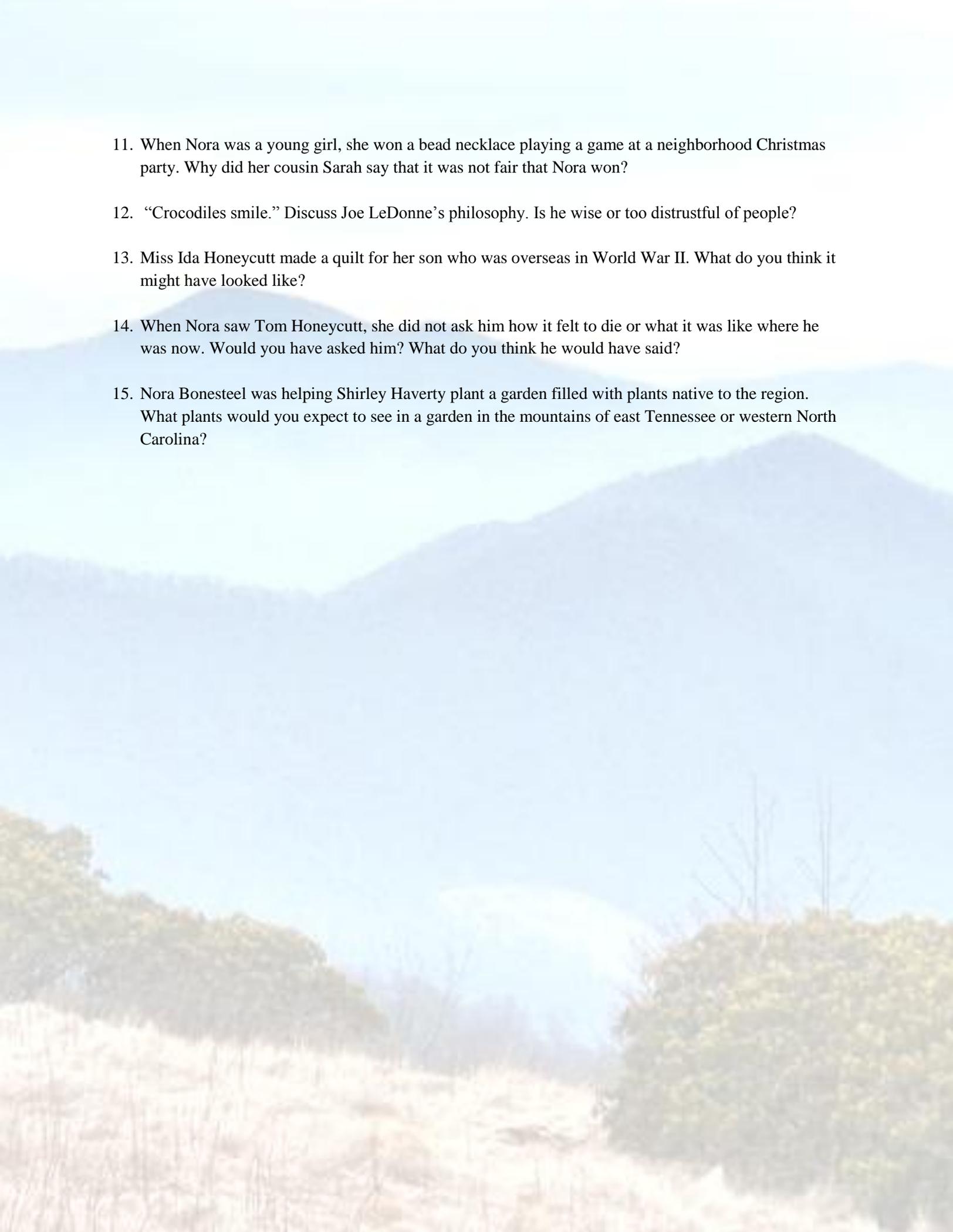
Nora Bonesteel's Christmas East

Reader's Guide

Discussion Questions



1. Through the memories of Nora Bonesteel, we see 1940's Christmas traditions in the Tennessee mountains. What holiday traditions do you remember from when you were growing up?
2. Stories of people having an ability like Nora Bonesteel's Sight are not uncommon among families of Scots / Irish / Welsh descent. Are there any incidents like this in your family?
3. The Havertys' CD of comic holiday songs aroused the ire of the ghost. What holiday song do you find most annoying?
4. What do you think would have happened at the Shulls' place if Joe LeDonne had gone there alone?
5. In the beginning of the book, Spencer Arrowood made a wish for Christmas. Did his wish come true, and if so, how?
6. Shirley Haverty is warned that traditional mountain people tend to be more formal than most people nowadays. They are not as quick to use first names of people they've just met, and they tend to be wary of instantly over-friendly people, suspecting them of ulterior motives. Do you think there is a difference between real friendship and general sociability?
7. When Nora was a child, her father taught her to recognize the different woods from which he made furniture. Assemble a collection of wooden objects (for example, carved spoons or spatulas) and see if you can tell one type of wood from another.
8. If you had a Christmas tree to represent the area or culture that you come from, what would it look like?
9. Considering Tom Honeycutt and the 1940's song *I'll Be Home for Christmas*, explain why you think Tom was annoyed by the Havertys' holiday decorations and music.
10. Oak, ash, and thorn were considered magic trees in ancient Britain. Research British folklore and see what beliefs were connected to each species of tree. (Ash refers to the Rowan tree, which today is sometimes called Mountain Ash.)

- 
11. When Nora was a young girl, she won a bead necklace playing a game at a neighborhood Christmas party. Why did her cousin Sarah say that it was not fair that Nora won?
 12. “Crocodiles smile.” Discuss Joe LeDonne’s philosophy. Is he wise or too distrustful of people?
 13. Miss Ida Honeycutt made a quilt for her son who was overseas in World War II. What do you think it might have looked like?
 14. When Nora saw Tom Honeycutt, she did not ask him how it felt to die or what it was like where he was now. Would you have asked him? What do you think he would have said?
 15. Nora Bonesteel was helping Shirley Haverty plant a garden filled with plants native to the region. What plants would you expect to see in a garden in the mountains of east Tennessee or western North Carolina?

Character List



Nora Bonesteel

A lifelong resident of the Ashe Mountain settlement in rural Wake County, Tennessee. Nora has the Sight, an ability not uncommon in people of Scots-Irish descent, which allows them a limited ability to know what things will happen in the future. Nora is fond of gardening, quilting, and observing the natural world on her farm on Ashe Mountain.

Spencer Arrowood

Sheriff of Wake County, a rural area in the east Tennessee mountains.

Joe LeDonne

Deputy sheriff, originally from Gallipolis, Ohio. LeDonne is a Vietnam veteran. He can be proud, cynical, and distrusting of people, but he admires his boss, and despite his reticence, he considers the sheriff his one friend.

Shirley Haverty

Somewhat flighty; a stranger to the local culture but kindhearted and willing to learn. Keen on gardening and sentimental.

Bill Haverty

Retired executive; organized and logical—likes to think he understands why things happen. Indulges his wife's fancies even though he himself has little interest in gardening or holiday celebrations.

J. D. Shull

An elderly farmer, doing his best to remain independent on his remote mountain farm. He is a clever fellow and a survivor, quick to see the benefits in any situation and to make them work in his favor.

Norma Shull

A quiet and dutiful wife. It is her shyness around strangers rather than any fear or feeling of subservience that makes her defer to her husband when strangers are present. She trusts her husband to take care of them, and she is content to let him do things his way, confident that it will all turn out right in the end.

Tom Honeycutt

Well-educated, well-mannered and kind, Tom had simple tastes for the joys of rural life: ice-cream-making, square dancing, and church gatherings. A soldier in World War II, Tom will miss his old community even though he would have been destined to leave it whether the war had happened or not.

What Parts Are True?



Appalachian History in the Novella

Lydia Bean

In 1776, frontierswoman Lydia Bean of the Watauga settlement in what is now east Tennessee was taken prisoner by the Cherokee and taken back to one of their villages where she was to be executed. As her captors were about to burn Mrs. Bean at the stake, the Cherokee wise woman (the *Ghigau*) Nancy Ward (*Nunyehi*) ordered that the woman be saved on the condition that she teach the Cherokee women how to make butter and cheese. Mrs. Bean remained in the settlement for several weeks instructing the women of the tribe. She was then released and allowed to return home.

The Chestnut Blight

Before the mid-twentieth century one in every four hardwood trees growing in the Appalachian Mountains was an American chestnut. Mature trees often grew straight and branch-free for fifty feet and could grow up to one hundred feet tall with a trunk diameter of fourteen feet at a few feet above ground level. For three centuries many barns and homes in the mountain South were made from American chestnut. The chestnut blight was accidentally introduced to North America around 1900, possibly on imported Japanese chestnut nursery stock. In 1905, American mycologist William Murrill isolated and described the fungus responsible (*Diaporthe parasitica*). By 1940, most mature American chestnut trees had been wiped out by the disease. Research now by the American Chestnut Foundation is attempting to bring back the American chestnut, perhaps as a hybrid with genes from the blight-resistant Chinese chestnut to protect it from the disease.

The Geological Connection: *The Serpentine Chain*

It is an ancient road, as old as the mountains it follows from one continent to the other. Set down by nature in volcanic swirls in the Triassic Period of geologic time, the Serpentine Chain snakes its way through the Appalachian Mountains of North America, from the hills of North Alabama to Campbellton, New Brunswick, on Canada's Bay of Chaleur.

Migrating birds follow this path in their spring and autumn migrations. The Cherokee, the Creek, and the Shawnee blazed the Warrior's Path alongside it, as a trading route to exchange goods (pelts for obsidian, seashells for pottery) among the Native American tribes. For the eighteenth-century pioneers who emigrated from Celtic Britain, and moved westward from the eastern seaboard, the Serpentine Chain marked an invisible connection between the frontier lands they homesteaded and the places these settlers had left behind on the other side of the ocean. For the chain was there, too—in the west of Ireland, shining in the cliffs of Cornwall and threading through the highlands of Scotland, a line in a great tartan pattern that encompasses the mountain regions of the Old World and the New.

You cannot see the Serpentine Chain—it is a mineral seam buried deep within the mountains—but a painter of skill and perception, one whose love of place resonates with this region—can capture its images: the hawk soaring above the wooded ridges; sunlit rocks glistening in a

mountain stream; the blue haze of the distant horizon over a patchwork of fields and forests. It might be north Alabama or the Irish hills in Connemara, the Virginia Blue Ridge or the Highlands of Scotland—they are all links in the Serpentine Chain, and when you move past the geology to culture and music and art and folklore, the pattern persists.

My ancestors followed this path, from the Scottish island of Islay and from the Yorkshire dales to settle in the western North Carolina mountains in the late 1700s. With them they brought their ballads, their quilt patterns, and the old stories of star-crossed lovers and elf magic, a veneer of elegance overlaying the endless toil and dangers of the eighteenth-century frontier. It is from them that I got my gift for reading and storytelling, my fascination with music, and my love for the mountains.

Serpentine is a rock-forming mineral, present in many metamorphic rocks, coloring them green, and producing a silky soft, carveable rock that has been used in artisans' work for centuries. It is found in the bowls carved by the Cherokee in western North Carolina, and in the spindle whorls used for weaving in Norway. The cultural significance of the Serpentine Chain lies in the link that it forms between New World Appalachia and the Celtic lands of western Britain, for both these places lie along its path, and the mountains of both regions once fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. As it says in the old hymn "O God Our Help in Ages Past": "Before the hills in order stood, and earth received her frame." It is from that time, eons ago, that the mineral chain originated, and it persisted, even as the newly formed Atlantic Ocean separated the two halves of the mountain chain into the mountains of Britain on one side and the Appalachians on the other.

When the eighteenth-century settlers sailed to America, fleeing the political unrest in Scotland and the economic hardships in England and Ireland, they landed in the port cities along the eastern seaboard, but they soon abandoned the coastal regions and headed westward to where the mountains towered over wide, fertile valleys and the land looked somehow familiar. In it, they caught glimpses of western Scotland, of the Welsh valleys, and the hills of Connemara. And they were right: they had indeed come full circle, back to the very same mountains they had left behind on the other side of the ocean.

Will the circle be unbroken? For millennia, it has stayed intact, forming a geological entity, and a cultural continuity to people who travel from one part of it to another. You may journey along the chain, capturing its images and celebrating the unity and the differences that one finds as one moves along the length of it. In our end is our beginning. Who we are and where we came from and how we got here—all these answers lie along the Serpentine Chain. You only have to follow it.

Mountain Customs and Their Origins

Helloing the House

Many of the early settlers in the mountain South came from areas of Britain that had suffered from the predations of invaders. For them, strangers came to mean trouble.

"Mountain people don't go where they're not invited."

There is a formality among the traditional inhabitants of the mountain South, perhaps a remnant of a lesson learned the hard way by their forebears. The friendly folk who bought the mineral rights of your land for fifty cents an acre; the dealer who paid you a dollar for an antique quilt or a spinning wheel and then sold it elsewhere for one hundred times that—all these people were effusively friendly, and none of them should have been trusted.