

The November Stranger Book Club Kit

A free discussion guide by Tammy Mundy



Welcome!

Thank you for choosing *The November Stranger* for your book club, or for exploring the book more deeply on your own.

In college my favorite classes were always creative writing and literature. I loved the critiques we gave each other on our own writing, and I loved the discussions about the stories we read. I always learned something I hadn't seen before, a character I came to understand differently, or a theme that actually changed the way I thought about life.

Book clubs are another way to experience stories in this most delightful way!

Nora's story provides a lot to talk about. Use as much or as little of the guide as you like. I hope you'll find the topics here leading your group to many rich and fulfilling discussions.

Enjoy!

~Tammy Mundy

About the novel

At the November new moon, Nora Sayers carries a meal to a crossroads on her family land in the Virginia Blue Ridge, following a tradition passed down through the women in her family. This year, the stranger who joins her needs much more than supper. As Nora begins to question the life she has built around duty, she must make room for herself and decide what it means to choose a life of her own.

The November Stranger is literary women's fiction with magical realism, set in the Virginia Blue Ridge.

About Tammy Mundy

Tammy Mundy is a Charlottesville-based writer with deep ancestral roots in the Virginia Blue Ridge foothills. A graduate of the University of Virginia, her interdisciplinary studies focused on creative writing, women's studies, and folkloric cultural studies. She draws on this background to weave stories about the choices that define us and the magic hidden in ordinary landscapes. *The November Stranger* is her debut novel.

Discussion questions

Spoiler Alert: The discussion questions assume you have finished the novel, including the epilogue.

Start with question 1, then choose any few that interest your group. Each numbered item can be read aloud as a discussion starter. Follow the conversation wherever it leads; you don't need to use every question or every follow-up.

1. The story moves from Nora's November ritual to the winter solstice. Which scene stayed with you after you finished the book? What about it moved, surprised, or unsettled you?
2. Nora is often the capable one, keeping the farm running and caring for others. When does that role serve her well, and when does it make her own needs harder to acknowledge? Which of her strengths would you most want her to carry into her new life?
3. In their meetings at the crossroads, Nora speaks with a stranger outside her ordinary life. What can Nora acknowledge in these conversations that she has avoided saying at home? How did your understanding of the stranger change as you read?
4. The novel includes the meal Nora carries to the crossroads, Pearl's warm kitchen, and the toast Jacob encourages Nora to eat when she is distraught. Which act of feeding or being fed felt most generous to you? What kinds of hunger does the story invite you to think about?
5. A basket, a quilt, and an index card carry the Sayers family tradition into Nora's life. Rose's journal reveals more of its history. How does learning that history change Nora's sense of what she owes her family? Which parts of her inheritance seem worth keeping, and which could she remake?
6. Nora comes to understand Katherine through memories, journals, and Pearl's account of her mother's life. Which discovery most changed your view of Katherine? How does learning more about the woman her mother actually was affect Nora's grief and her own choices?
7. Pearl offers stories, advice, and practical help, while carrying losses of her own. When did her confidence feel reassuring to you, and when did it feel demanding? Is there any part of her advice you would want Nora to question?

8. The stranger's life holds opportunities to paint and encounter other artists, along with loneliness and loss. Did her account make leaving home seem more tempting, more costly, or both? What does Nora gain by carrying memories of that life into the one she chooses?
9. Jacob's decision to enter hospice work brings a reduction in income. In the epilogue, he also names the fear that has shaped his part in the marriage. What does his choice reveal about his own hopes and needs? How does his understanding of being a good partner change?
10. Nora runs into problems with money and construction as she works on the barn. Did you ever want her to give up or change direction? How do those practical difficulties shape your understanding of her courage and what it takes to make room for creative work?
11. As Nora begins asking openly for help, other people become part of the barn's transformation. Mason needs housing and has skills that the project needs. What changes when Nora lets others take part? What did you make of the exchange between Nora and Mason?
12. Nora burns her earlier paintings and later sets up her easel in the loft while the barn is still unfinished. How did you respond to her decision to burn the paintings? What changes when she begins making art inside the place she has been creating?
13. In *Self-Portrait in the Loft*, the figure stands weight settled into her feet and open hands, with several shadows around her. What did the painting suggest to you about how Nora sees herself at that point? Was there another image in the novel, such as the old church windows or the crossroads, whose meaning changed for you as you read?
14. At the winter solstice, the residency is still unfinished and its grant uncertain. Nora and Jacob have made choices that will shape what comes next. Did the ending feel complete to you? What do you imagine their lives looking like beyond the final page?

Optional food and companion reading

Use these extras if your group would enjoy a shared meal or another story.

Sayers Family Cookbook

For a gathering around the table, choose a recipe from the *Sayers Family Cookbook*, or invite members to bring something they associate with home. Bread and coffee are enough for a simple meeting. You could also share the work of a supper inspired by the chicken, potatoes, and bread Nora carries to the crossroads. If someone wants to tell the story behind a dish they make, let that be part of the evening.

Free cookbook download: tammymundy.com/cookbook

Enough for Two - A Prequel

Spoiler Alert: The discussion questions below reveal the short story's events and ending.

Enough for Two takes place seven years before the novel, during Nora's first November without her mother. Read it after the novel if your group would like to return to the beginning of her inherited tradition.

Free prequel download: tammymundy.com/crossroads

Discussion questions:

1. What makes Nora's decision to give away Katherine's coat difficult, even when she is sure she wants the woman and baby to have it?
2. The guest helps Nora as well as accepting help. Which moment most shapes the relationship between them?
3. How does Nora's invitation to Pearl at the ending change your reading of the novel, where asking for help becomes so important?

A few tips for your meeting

- For a meeting of about an hour, spend the first few minutes on question 1, then choose three or four more questions. Leave a little time at the end to share what someone else helped you notice.
- For a longer evening, add snacks or a meal, or the optional *Enough for Two* discussion. Agree beforehand if the group wants to read the prequel.
- Invite everyone to contribute, but give people room to pass if they don't want to speak. Welcome personal stories when someone chooses to share them.

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To share your group's thoughts, write to Tammy at hello@tammymundy.com.

Kitchen Table Notes is Tammy's newsletter for readers who would like book news and stories from the Blue Ridge. You can subscribe at her website.

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