

The author's suggested questions:

1. What is the "something blue" of the title?
2. One of the major themes of the novel is the power of love. When in the story is love redemptive? When is it not?
3. What role do religion and religious faith play in the lives of characters such as Jimmy, Judy's father, and the aunts? Why does Judy say, "Any adult who can swallow the basic tenets of the Nicene Creed is no mean apologist"?
4. To Judy, the trailer becomes symbolic of Hamp's commitment to their relationship. Is she right? In what way does the trailer function as a larger symbol?
5. What is the difference between Judy's view of Tina as the princess and Tina's view of herself?
6. What role does Mr. Amos play in the story? (Think "deus ex machina.")
7. What impact does Hamp's background have on his life decisions?
8. What does the Southern sense of historical continuity contribute to the lives of the characters?
9. Judy compares herself to Lewis and Clark, feels that she has what it takes to be an explorer and an adventurer. Does she?
10. What is the significance of Judy's cutting a window in the wall of the lumberyard office?
11. A lot of water imagery is used. Judy compares her home and her marriage to a leaky boat and later talks about swimming to shore. What does the imagery say about her feelings toward her marriage and her life?
12. Are there any victims in this story?
13. Why does Tina marry Jimmy?
14. Judy, Tina, and Edna have absorbed through their lives the ability to handle the hospital experience. They all know what to do. In what ways does their response to their father's illness reflect their Southern experience?
15. Is the "Southern experience" so very different from the American one, or the human one? What makes a piece of writing such as *Something Blue* regional, national, or universal?



Jean Christopher Spaugb was born in Union, South Carolina. She grew up mostly in South Carolina, in Clemson and Union. She did not like school, preferring the outdoors, but nobody asked her opinion, so she graduated from Union High School in 1964 at age 17, and then went to Columbia College. Three years later, she graduated and went to Hollins College for a year of graduate school. In 1968, at the age of 21, she got a job teaching at Ashley Hall School in Charleston, South Carolina. She made \$4,500 a year and has never been as wealthy since. She later taught at the College of Charleston, Salem Academy, and Columbia College. After marrying Richard Spaugb, she moved to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, and got a job as a reader for John F. Blair. She rose rapidly to the position of editor, partly because she wore hats to work and Mr. Blair liked hats. She had two children and gave up editing. She worked at odds-and-ends jobs and wrote books. In 1993, Jean got a job as a secretary in an aluminum company and found her true vocation. Her honest-to-God true vocation is of course Writer, but Secretary pays more bills and has better insurance. Plus, she gets to dress up, wear makeup, and open other people's mail. She resides in Lawrenceville, Georgia, with her husband and children.



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JOHN F. BLAIR, PUBLISHER Reading Group Guide

Something Blue

by Jean Christopher Spaugb

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This guide is intended to enhance readers' enjoyment of *Something Blue*, Jean Christopher Spaugb's first novel. It is a collaboration between author and publisher, unique because the discussion questions are Jean's own.

Much like its central character Judy Duncan, *Something Blue* is a quietly powerful book. Jean Spaugb has created a touching, often humorous look at the bonds and burdens of family. Judy Duncan knows how to be a wife, a mother, a daughter, and a sister; but when those relationships are altered beyond recognition, beyond what was once so comfortable and secure, she has to rediscover how to live her life. And along the way, she finds the freedom she long ago renounced for love.

When we asked Jean Christopher Spaugh who most influenced her work and why, we thought her response so true to the spirit of *Something Blue* that we wanted to share it with you.

The staff at John F. Blair, Publisher

Miss Edna Hope was the Latin teacher at Union High School. She was the most feared person in the school. On the first day of class every year, she passed out index cards on which we all wrote our names. Then she took up the cards and put a rubber band around the stack. She had a stack for every class. Every day, we had translations, and Miss Hope would sit at her desk and pick up one of those stacks of cards. She would take off the rubber band with a little snap and shuffle the cards in her hands—she was a tiny old lady, and she had tiny, thin fingers—and with a thin smile, she would look at the card on top and say, “Sarah!” or “David!” or “Jean!” with a crack in her voice like a whip. The person whose name she called would sometimes actually jerk or jump in his seat as though shocked before beginning to translate.

Miss Hope was slightly hard of hearing. As a rule, she liked boys better than girls, I think because boys translated louder and she could understand them. She hated golf and once said to Joey Morrissey, who was on the golf team, “Why do you like a game where you follow a little ball around all day? Golf is a game for old men!”

My father died when I was in the ninth grade, in Miss Hope’s first-year Latin class, and she was very kind to me—I hadn’t known until then that she had a heart. But she did.

Miss Hope’s Latin class was kind of like the marines. She was tough and made you suffer and quake and cry and wish you were anywhere else but there, nailed down on a row in a hard, scarred desk by the window, working your way through Vercingetorix and Caesar’s Gallic Wars while the world went by outside that window. Only the strong survived Miss Hope’s Latin, and if you survived, you knew you were capable of anything.

Miss Nealy Beatty was the English teacher. She was about our parents’ age and was very cool, because she sat on the edge of her desk and drank Cokes in class. Miss Beatty was probably the best English teacher who ever lived, and everybody knew it. She used her considerable influence to keep her classes small. We had discussion groups and wrote essays every week, read them aloud if they were good enough, and discussed them. Our textbooks included the *New York Times* and the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Miss Beatty insisted on excellence. She said we were the best and the brightest. (We were the class of ’64, the first

class of babies born in 1946, mostly the children of soldiers come home from World War II, and we felt the pressure.) Miss Beatty kept us to a relentlessly high standard, assumed we would always do our best—assumed we were, if not brilliant, at least well educated. And so we were.

Dr. Henry Rollins at Columbia College was a big, gruff genius. He was the first man I ever loved who wasn’t a member of my family.

Dr. Rollins died shortly after I graduated from Columbia College. When I heard that he was dead, I was stunned. I didn’t go back to the campus for years, until finally I went there to teach for someone who was on sabbatical and made a sort of peace with the place. Once, I went to a reunion and several of us English majors started talking about Dr. Rollins and Dr. Barbara Ferry Johnson, another wonderful English teacher who was a writer, and we all burst into tears. People looked at us and laughed—at this bunch of middle-aged women in suits and pearls leaning on each other’s shoulders and sobbing, wiping our eyes for a man who had read Yeats to us and a woman who had taught us to love Arthurian legends.

We loved them because they were the first adults—and, for many of us, the only adults—who thought the life of the mind was worth living and who, while living honestly in the world themselves—for they were both married, effective, well-grounded people—actually made a living doing things with literature. That possibility was a very reassuring concept for many of us. Mostly, we were young women who read *Bride* magazine and planned our eventual weddings to South Carolina boys who attended “the University,” Clemson, or the Citadel. We would be schoolteachers mostly, and have two children, a boy and a girl, and we would mostly live happily ever after. Dr. Rollins, Dr. Johnson, and others—Anne Frierson Griffin, the creative writing teacher, and Dr. Parker, a religion professor, to name only two—addressed those other issues that lurked in the other half of our bridal minds, issues we mostly didn’t want to address, like what if we didn’t live happily ever after. Quietly, insistently, they taught us Lear, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King.

Dr. Rollins called me into his office one day and told me he wanted me to apply for a Book-of-the-Month Club Fellowship. At that time, the Book-of-the-Month Club gave 10 or 12 fellowships a year to promising young writers. Dr. Rollins made me apply for it, though I felt I had no hope of winning it, and I did win. I used the money to go to graduate school, but the most important thing about that was that Dr. Rollins proved to me that I was a writer, and that being a writer and living the life of the mind was an acceptable

thing, even an admirable thing. After all, he was doing it himself.

Richard Dillard taught, and still teaches, at Hollins College. He was my advisor, head of the writing program, and husband at that time of Annie Dillard, who was in the graduate program with me. There were six of us in the graduate program that year—two men and four women. We were all 20 or 21. Three of the girls—Mimi Drake, Dottie White, and I—lived in an apartment in an old house in an apple orchard. Annie, of course, lived with Richard.

We all spent a lot of time together. We used to congregate at our house and eat spaghetti or meat loaf. I had a car, a Volkswagen Beetle, which we all used to drive to class. We would also go over to Richard and Annie’s on Sunday afternoon to eat all their food and drink up all their beer and soft drinks. I’m sure we drove Richard Dillard crazy, invading his house at all hours and stealing his wife away to take long walks with us and have picnics and talk about Life.

Richard Dillard is a very talented man. He is a widely known teacher and literary critic, and I guess he was widely known then, too, but I was unaware of it. I thought of him as Annie’s husband. He used to sit in the living room and dry his hair with a towel. We all loved him. We loved the fact that he was married to Annie, who was beautiful and had long blond hair and was our friend.

Richard Dillard liked baseball and science fiction and going to the movies, and he wrote incredibly beautiful poetry. He still does, in fact. He cared about politics and the state of literature in the world. He treated me and my friends like writers, like we already were writers, like we already had something viable to say. He sat expectantly, mostly silently, while we wrote, read what we had written, commented to each other about our writing. We waited for his actual comments, which never came. He would say phrases like “invisible style.”

We hung on his every word.

Richard Dillard taught what is almost impossible to teach, that a writer’s work, if it is honest—that is, thoughtful, hard-earned, worked through—is always valid. It doesn’t have to be published, sold, appreciated by millions. It just has to be written. Written words have a validity of their own. He taught that, the only way it can be taught—by living it.

He loved books, read constantly, listened patiently to our adolescent style, gave our efforts the credibility of his attention. A raised eyebrow from Richard Dillard was more significant than, well, anything. He treated us like writers. He taught us that what we were as writers did not, after all, depend on what he or others thought, but on the words themselves.