



1. There are many examples of hope—literally and figuratively—in the novel that the author illuminates. Discuss those. Are you a hopeful person? Why, or why not? Do you surround yourself with hopeful people? What are some instances in your life when you felt like hope was lost? How did you recapture it? Or did you find yourself unable to do so?
2. *The Hope Chest*—like the author’s debut novel, *The Charm Bracelet*—was inspired by the stories—the oral history—of the author’s grandmothers and family. In addition, the histories of the heirloom items are also revealed. In numerous passages, Mattie shares the stories of her life and the meaning of her hope chest with Rose and her daughter, Jeri—younger generations—generational tales that would be lost if she didn’t share them. Do you think we are losing our collective family “heirloom” histories (i.e., that of telling family stories, sharing our family heirlooms)? If so, what will be the consequences to future generations? If not, why? And what are you doing to preserve those traditions?
3. Rose Hoffs—the caregiver in *The Hope Chest*—was inspired not only by the author’s mother, a hospice nurse, but also the caregivers who provided end-of-life care for the author’s father. Have you been a caregiver for someone you love (parent, spouse, child, family member, friend)? How did that experience change you? What did your love and support mean to the person for whom you were caring?
4. Mattie Tice—the main character in *The Hope Chest*—was inspired by the author’s uncle, who passed away from ALS. Have you known or cared for—or do you

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currently know or care for—someone with ALS? What was that experience like for them and their family? For you?

5. If there was one story or lesson from your life that you could share with a younger family member—a child, a grandchild, a niece or nephew, or a cousin—what would it be? What story or stories do you want to be sure to share and pass along in your life? And with whom?
6. Redefining family is a main theme in *The Hope Chest*. When the author lost his father, he became the last surviving member of his immediate family and felt adrift and lost until friends, other family members, and his father’s caregivers filled the void. Has your family changed over time? How? Has that impacted you? Do you think the meaning of family has expanded over generations? Why, or why not?
7. In *The Hope Chest*, Don tries to come to terms—often by hiding his own emotions to remain strong—with the impending loss of his beloved wife as their fiftieth wedding anniversary approaches. How have you coped with the loss of a loved one? Or not coped?
8. Don and Mattie are forced to sell their beloved lake cottage in *The Hope Chest*, a loss that changes their lives and world. Have you ever had to sell a beloved cottage or home? What was that experience like?
9. Another main theme in *The Hope Chest* is how we view not only our elders but also those who are infirmed. Often we see them only as old or sick, and not as “real” people with rich life histories. The author not only saw his uncle who had ALS experience this (people often yelled at him, or talked to him as if he were a child)



but also his elderly father. Have you seen someone you love treated as if they weren't a "real" person? How did you handle it? How did they?

10. The childlike wonder and honesty of Rose's daughter, Jeri (Fun Fact: Jeri was the real name of the author's mother)—especially in dealing with Mattie's illness—is refreshing and a stark contrast to the way Mattie and Don's friends handle it. Why do you think we often lose our ability to show and share our emotions as adults? How does that affect our relationships and basic human interaction?
11. Hobbies and passions—painting, gardening, baking, collecting and polishing lake stones—play a big role in *The Hope Chest*. What are your favorite hobbies and passions? Were they passed along or taught to you by a family member or friend? What do they mean to you (personally, spiritually, mentally, physically, professionally, artistically), and how do they keep you centered and happy?
12. Despite her illness, Mattie is a fiercely strong, independent woman. Talk about some of the strong, independent women in your life and what they mean/have meant to you. And discuss how women are portrayed today not only in fiction but also in the media.
13. There is a key moment at the end of *The Hope Chest* that changes Rose's life. Have you ever helped someone without their knowledge? How did that impact the life of that person? And how did it impact/change your life?

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14. *The Hope Chest* has often been described in reviews as a “tearjerker” and “unabashedly sentimental.” What makes you cry? Is it cathartic? Why are sentimental books often deemed as “less than” by many literary critics? When—and more importantly, why—did sentimentality become a curse word in literary review, considering some of our greatest books are steeped in sentimentality? Is a happy ending seen as a literary weakness because reviewers see it as a cop-out? Or has life made too many of us unsentimental and believers that arm’s length is better than a hug? If intellectual distance and posturing is not the best way for humans to navigate life, why is it seen as a strength in the narrative that parallels our existence? Do you think books and characters that parallel our real lives and existences are important? Why? Do you consider yourself to be sentimental?
15. *The Hope Chest* was written as a tribute to the author’s grandmothers—whose hope chests and the heirlooms held inside (desert rose dishes, McCoy vases, embroidered aprons and pillowcases, scrapbooks and family Bibles) inspired the novel. Do you or did you have a hope chest? What treasured items did you place inside it? Do you still have those, did you pass them along, or did you lose track of them? And did you pass along your hope chest? Why or why not? Do you collect any other heirloom items? What are they and what stories do they tell/memories do they provide?