

Reading Group Guide: The Cruellest Month

Discussion questions for *The Three Pines Mysteries*, by Louise Penny

1. How important is the use of humor in this book?
2. Which Three Pines villager would you most like to have cafe au lait with at the bistro?
3. Why is Ruth a villager?
4. Louise Penny says her books are about murder, but at their heart they're about other things. What else is this book about? What are some other themes?
5. Agent Nichol is an extremely controversial character in the books. What do you think of her? What purpose does she serve?

Discussion questions for *The Cruellest Month*

1. We're told that Three Pines is "only ever found by people lost." In what way are Peter and Clara, Ruth, Myrna, Gabri and Olivier, and even Gamache and his team of investigators, lost people?
2. Early in the story, when Peter is looking at Clara's unfinished painting: "He suddenly felt something grab him. From behind. It reached forward and right into him....Tears came to his eyes as he was overcome by this wraith that had threatened all his life. That he'd hidden from as a child, that he'd run from and buried and denied. It had stalked him and finally found him. Here, in his beloved wife's studio. Standing in front of this creation of hers the terrible monster had found him. And devoured him." What do you think Peter's "monster" is? How does it manifest itself throughout the story? What becomes of the monster in the end?
3. Peter, Ruth and Olivier stay behind when the group heads to the Hadley house for the séance. Discuss these characters and their various reasons for avoiding the house and/or the ritual.
4. What do you think is the difference between magic and miracles?
5. How does the novel's epigraph, from T. S. Eliot's poem "The Waste Land," resonate with the story? What do you think of Peter's interpretation of April's cruelty: "All those spring flowers slaughtered. Happens almost every year. They're tricked into blooming, into coming out. Opening up. And not just the spring bulbs, but the bulbs on the trees....All out and happy. And then boom, a freak snowstorm kills them all."
6. As the plot proceeds, is it possible to guess or deduce the killer? If so, at what point, and on what grounds?

7. Louise Penny is unusually sensitive to the difficulties of finding love and the struggle to champion it in a harsh world. In *The Cruellest Month*, the relationships between Odile and Gilles, Hazel and Madeleine, and Clara and Peter, are very different. What does each relationship say about love? Are there any common elements shared by all?

8. How does Gamache's trusting nature, seen by many as his greatest failing, ultimately serve him?

9. "How bitter a thing it is to look into happiness through another man's eyes," wrote Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. Discuss the various manifestations of jealousy in *The Cruellest Month*. What makes Gamache so much happier than his seemingly more fortunate best friend, Brébeuf?