

This reading group guide for *Sweetgrass* includes an introduction, discussion questions, and ideas for enhancing your book club. The suggested questions are intended to help your reading group find new and interesting angles and topics for your discussion. We hope that these ideas will enrich your conversation and increase your enjoyment of the book.

## Introduction

Sweetgrass is a historic tract of land in South Carolina that has been home to the Blakely family for eight generations. But Sweetgrass—named for the indigenous grass that grows in the area—is in trouble. Taxes are skyrocketing. Bulldozers are leveling the surrounding properties. And the Blakelys could be forced to sell the one thing that continues to hold their disintegrating family together.

In this poignant novel of hope, acceptance and the powerful gift of forgiveness, Mary Alice Monroe paints an intimate portrait of a family that must learn to unravel old patterns and weave together a new future.

## Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. Themes derived from wildlife and nature are often found in Mary Alice Monroe's novels. In *SWEETGRASS*, we learn the plant *muhlenbergia filipes* is disappearing from the South Carolina landscape, where the novel takes place. Loss is a major theme of the novel. How does the loss of this indigenous plant symbolize the loss experienced by the Blakely family? The Bennett family?

Discuss other losses dealt with in the novel.

Discuss how the characters work to PRESERVE land, family, home, rituals, traditions and culture.

2. The matriarchs, Mama June and Nona, have known each other for nearly fifty years. Yet in chapter 4, Nona's daughter states that the two women are not friends. Nona ponders the nature of her relationship with Mama June and the delicate, emotional issue of race relations. Discuss these thoughts. How does the relationship between the two strong women ripen in the novel?

3. It is argued that the loss of a child is the greatest loss a person can experience. The members of the Blakely family were never the same after Hamlin's death. Discuss how each member dealt with this loss: Preston, Mama June, Morgan, Nan.

4. In SWEETGRASS, many of the relationships in the novel suffered from lack of honesty, neglect, isolation and depression that, in time, eroded the bonds between them. What precipitated this crumbling of bonds? How common is this in families today? Discuss what factors wove the Blakely family back together and how forgiveness played a major role in their healing.

5. Sweetgrass basket making is an African American tradition that has been taught by mother to daughter to granddaughter in South Carolina for over three hundred years. Discuss the parallels between the basket making and the weaving together of family in this novel. What historical significance does sweetgrass have to both the Blakely and Bennett families? How does this history bond them together? How does it cause friction?

6. Many factors threaten the family's ability to hold on to the home: rising taxes, aging parents who can't care for it any longer, children moving away, housing development. What happens to the Blakely family when it comes time to decide what to do with the family seat? How common is this in families today?

7. For the Blakely family, when the property was to be sold, emotions ran high and arguments sparked jealousy, resentment, hurt and betrayal. Discuss how deep into the past some of these feelings ran and what caused them.

Discuss the questions that arise from such family turmoil. What holds a family together? *What is family?*

8. Discuss family rituals and traditions that help sustain your family bonds.