

## The Living Discussion Questions

1. The characters in this book are haunted by their dead. Were there any passages or images that haunted you?
2. Annie Dillard highlights many moments of various cultures coexisting in the Puget Sound and how they adjust to each other. Which moments stood out for you? Did the diversity surprise you?
3. When Minta's family came out to visit, Minta saw her life in Puget Sound with "fresh eyes". Is this an experience you can relate to? Do you think this helped Minta decide what she wanted for herself?
4. Ada indicates that her feather bed "had turned into a sorry joke". What other misconceptions did settlers carry with them? Did the people survive despite these misconceptions or because of them?
5. What are the various characters' perspectives towards God and religion? What about politics? Are these major motivators in these people's lives? What does motivate the various characters to do what they do?
6. Hugh witnesses so much death. How does he deal with what he sees and does that change as the book progresses?
7. Does the title accurately reflect the contents of the book? Why or Why not? What else would you call this book?
8. *The Living* is classified as historical fiction. The author usually writes nonfiction. How would you describe Annie Dillard's writing style in this work?

Additional questions courtesy of [www.litlovers.com](http://www.litlovers.com)

1. Talk about the role of women in this story—especially the competing views by Eustace Honer and the Nooksack chief, Kulshan Jim. Both feel the other culture mistreats its women. What do you make of the comparison?

2. Many of Dillard's characters are an eccentric bunch—but they are also richly drawn. Which ones do you have particular sympathy for—or find repellent—and why? In particular, talk about Ada and Rooney Fishburn: are they equipped for what faces them? John Ireland Sharp and his idealism? Minta and June Randall and the choices they make?
3. Death is ever present in this work. Discuss the ways in which Dillard uses the crab (pincers of death?) as a symbol of life's tenuous hold, death's constant presence.
4. The structure of this novel is interesting: Dillard covers the events at the beginning of the book in a breath-taking pace, and then revisits them. As a result, she has removed much of the suspense—readers know what happens. How does her unusual plot structure strike you? Why might she have written in this manner?
5. Consider the different cultures that bump up against each other. How do they impact one another—do they assimilate with or learn from each other...or remain untouched? In what way is this slice of frontier similar or different from the nation as a whole?
6. How does the influx of civilization—gold, the railroad, and real estate—affect Whatcom and its residents? In your view, are changes for the better or worse...or both?
7. Talk about how the dream of brotherhood is turned on its head with the brutal treatment of the socialists and unionists toward the Celestials and Terrestials.