

## Discussion Questions for *Sea Captain's Wife* by Martha Hodes

Most of these questions were taken or adapted from the questions at <http://seacaptainswife.com/media/pdf/reading-group-questions.pdf>.

1. Did you like the book? If so, what was your favorite part of the book? If not, why not?
2. Did you learn anything? If so, what information in the book was new to you? What surprised you most about the daily lives and labor of working-class women and families in 19th-century America?
3. Has anyone visited Manchester, New Hampshire or Grand Cayman Island? Tell us about it.
4. Did any thing that happened or was said in the book stick with you? Did the book trigger any emotions as you were reading it?
5. In what ways can Eunice be described as an unconventional woman ahead of her time? In what ways can she be described as a conventional woman caught up in her own time?
6. Other than Eunice, which characters did you find yourself most drawn to? For whom did you feel sympathy or antipathy? Did your feelings toward various family members change over the course of the narrative?
7. Most historians and biographers choose to write about well-known people from the past. What is the value of writing about a completely ordinary and unknown person?
8. Imagine Eunice herself reading *The Sea Captain's Wife*. What might she think of the way Hodes shaped her story and the meanings Hodes found within her life?
9. Eunice wrote to her mother: "I write you a good many letters that I dont send. When I feel lonesome and bad as if I must see you, I set down and write, then the next day burn them up." If the author could find just one more letter from Eunice, what subject or question would you most hope it would address or explain?
10. The Civil War acts as a catalyst to much of Eunice's story, including her experiences in the Deep South, her return to New England, and many of her losses. What aspects of the Civil War did her story illuminate for you?
11. In her letters, Eunice often conveyed the precariousness of life by invoking the common 19th-century phrases "if nothing happens" and "if I live." Are there ways in which these phrases resonate for you in the present day?
12. Hodes employs a number of unconventional forms for a work of nonfiction. She renders Eunice's words in italic type and without quotation marks to integrate Eunice's perspective more seamlessly into the story. She opens each of the book's core chapters with a single complete letter written by Eunice, to give readers a sense of Eunice's voice. As a reader, how did you respond to these literary strategies?
13. Hodes visited the various places where Eunice lived and describes them as they appear in the present day. Hodes also found descendants of the Richardson and Connolly families in the course of her research. How do these forays into the present day affect the story of the past that Hodes tells in *The Sea Captain's Wife*?
14. At the book's outset, we learn that Eunice drowned in a hurricane. How did this early revelation affect your experience of reading the book? How did you feel when you came to this episode again, at the end?
15. Did Eunice inspire you in any way? Did she disappoint you in any way? In what ways does Eunice's story feel meaningful for the 21st century?
16. Hodes invokes two epigraphs in *The Sea Captain's Wife*. At the outset she quotes Emily Dickinson: "I'm Nobody! Who are you?/Are you--Nobody--Too?" and toward the end she quotes T. S. Eliot: "These are only hints and guesses,/Hints followed by guesses." Why do you think Hodes chose these lines? What meanings do you find in them for Eunice's story?
17. Are there any questions you would like to ask?