

Questions for Discussion:

1. For nine years, Babe keeps a terrible secret. How much of a toll do you think it takes on her? Does her hardscrabble background make her tougher than Grace and Millie in the face of adversity?
2. In the post WWII era, combat fatigue, or what we now call post-traumatic stress disorder, was a dark secret. There was little therapy, and no support groups existed. Do you think in that era Babe could have found better ways to cope with Claude's problems? Should she have insisted they have a child? How much do you think she regrets not having one? Would you have blamed her if she left him?
3. Grace and Millie have diametrically opposite reactions to losing their husbands, and both think they are trying to protect their children. Do you think they really believe that or are they merely justifying their own predilections? What effect does Grace's behavior have on her daughter, Amy? What does Millie's have on her son, Jack?
4. Is Grace really so devoted to Charlie's memory or does her grief allow her to avoid confronting new realities? What does her breakdown in the front yard say about her feelings toward her late husband and herself?
5. Is Millie callous or a fierce survivor? Do you see her as a manipulative wife and mother or as a woman trying to protect her family?
6. In an era that regarded misfortune as something to be ashamed of and silent suffering as a virtue, all three women keep secrets from husbands, children, and one another. Our own era believes in openness as a cure, or at least as a form of solace. Do you think Babe, Grace, and Millie would have had an easier time of it if they had shared their problems and unhappiness?
7. Grace's father-in-law, King, often behaves badly, resenting and punishing vets who return from the war. Can you sympathize with his heartbreak and loss nonetheless? How much is the sexual advice he gives Grace a reflection of the mores and beliefs of the era, and how much is simply a reflection of his character?

8. The psychiatrist tells Grace that the solution to her problem is a husband. Were you surprised at how narrow-minded America was at the time or do you think that in many ways—race, religion, gender, sex—we have not changed as much as we think?

9. How do you interpret the triangle of Grace, Mac, and Morris? Do you think they would behave differently today? What would you have done in Grace's place after marrying Morris?

10. Babe was a poor girl who married into the middle class. Both of Grace's husbands had plenty of money. After the war, Millie's husband, Al, makes a small fortune. To what extent are the women's lives changed by their new economic statuses, and in what ways do all three remain similar? What do you think this says about the beginning of the most prosperous period in America's history and about our own era?