

### Discussion Questions for *The Arsonist's Last Words* by Alison R. Lockwood

- 1) The novel's epigraph, from the poem "Retribution" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, reads: "Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small." What does this mean? How does it relate to the story?
- 2) The author notes Juni Bruder's suicide on Page 1. How does this knowledge affect your reading experience?
- 3) Juni's brother, a priest, is the one who finds the last chapters she wrote—and tried to destroy—about the real cause of the fire. He says, "She must have known what I would do." What choice do you think Peter made?
- 4) The reader sifts through a heap of documents—news articles, phone transcripts, letters—much like Peter must have done. His sister wrote everything, including the "book" we see. As Valerie Rose claims, "What you write is what people will think is true." Is Juni a reliable narrator?
- 5) Juni says she understood Marco Abissi's actions because "she'd lain at the bottom of that same black hole, looking up." How do her misperceptions, along with her troubled past, shape the Plaza narrative?
- 6) Many characters in the novel—Web Browning, Frankie Drummer, George Gray—get their names from epitaphs in *Spoon River Anthology* by Edgar Lee Masters. As Juni discovers, the paragons lauded in obituaries often have little to do with their human subjects. The need to "honor the dead" is one of our oldest cultural traditions. Why is it so important to us?
- 7) Dante Costas is described as a student of the ancient Greek philosophers, one who "knew an argument in moral relativism when he heard one." Is there a universal definition of right and wrong, or does the truth depend on your point of view? Writing from so many different perspectives, what is Lockwood trying to say about "the slippery nature of truth"?
- 8) Though usually compassionate with her subjects, Juni expresses private scorn for Dante Costas and Chuck Bliss, men who cheated on their wives. We learn that Juni was abandoned by her father, betrayed by her ex-husband. Why would she turn away from Luke Havergal, a man who would have been true to her?
- 9) Dante mentions that he works in "one of the tallest and ugliest buildings in the city, Yamasaki's eyesore, the north one." Why is this significant?
- 10) Juni commits suicide after learning the truth about the Plaza fire. How does this make you feel about her as a character? Is she a hero or a coward?
- 11) If your loved one died at the Plaza, would you want to know why the fire was set?
- 12) What *were* the arsonist's last words?