



## Discussion Questions: *Vinegar Hill* by A. Manette Ansay

From: [amanetteansay.com](http://amanetteansay.com)

1. What does the first paragraph of A. Manette Ansay's novel tell us about the atmosphere at 512 Vinegar Hill? What does our first glimpse of Ellen suggest about her role within this family? Is it significant that Vinegar Hill begins at the supper table?
2. As Ellen takes her evening walk through town, she finds a trail of women's footprints in the snow and places her own feet in them, "so that she herself leaves no tracks, no trace, no sign that she has ever been there" (p. 22). Ellen later reveals that she has learned something important from her traditional sisters: "Disguise yourself. Don't say what you feel.' This was the key to a happy marriage, the key to a strong faith in God." (p. 46) Why does Ellen feel disguise is necessary? Is it a survival tactic or a weakness? Where else in the novel does the theme of disguise occur?
3. The novel's first section is called "Braid." Where does the image of a braid appear? What is its significance in terms of Ellen and Amy? Would you define this mother-daughter relationship as a close one? Does it change over the course of the novel?
4. Why does James decide to move his family home to Wisconsin? Are the reasons merely financial? Why does he withdraw from Ellen and the children? Are there any scenes in the novel where he reaches out?
5. Tucking the children into bed, James thinks of Halloween. "Their hands remind him of skeleton hands; their eyes the round, blank eyes of ghosts." (p. 83) What does he fear when he looks at his children, and where does this fear come from? Do you think he would like to be a better father, a better husband? What do the words "father" and "husband" mean to a man like James?
6. Discuss James' relationship with his late brother, Mitch. Why does James continue to idolize Mitch, despite the abuse he suffered at Mitch's hands? Why does James, even now, find strength in the idea of being Mitch (as on page 200)? How does the atmosphere of abuse in which James grew up affect him as an adult?
7. How would you describe the relationship between Mary Margaret and Salome. Do you think they loved or even liked each other as children? Now? What binds them together?

8. Why does Ellen's friend Barb make Ellen learn to drive a stick shift? Why is Ellen so afraid to learn? How might Ellen's life be different if the book were set in the present day instead of 1972? How might her life be the same?
9. In what ways is Catholicism a comfort to Ellen? In what ways does it limit her choices? What is the significance, on page 135, when she comes to see the crucifix as a dead man, a corpse? Ultimately, does Ellen abandon her faith?
10. Why is the story told from several different viewpoints? What does each narrator's voice add to the story? Is it significant that Fritz's voice is missing?
11. Can you identify the moment in the novel where Ellen decides to leave James? What gives her the courage to do so?
12. What do you think the future holds for Ellen and James and the children? If you could write a coda, a final chapter showing these characters one year after the novel ends, what would it say?

### About This Book

In a stark, troubling, yet ultimately triumphant celebration of self-determination, award-winning author A. Manette Ansay re-creates a stifling world of guilt and pain, and the tormented souls who inhabit it. It is 1972 when circumstance carries Ellen Grier and her family back to Holly's Field, Wisconsin. Dutifully accompanying her newly unemployed husband, Ellen has brought her two children into the home of her in-laws on Vinegar Hill--a loveless house suffused with the settling dust of bitterness and routine--where calculated cruelty is a way of life preserved and perpetuated in the service of an exacting God. Behind this facade of false piety, there are sins and secrets that could crush a vibrant young woman's spirit. Yet it is here that Ellen must find the strength to endure, change, and grow in the all-pervading darkness that threatens to destroy everything she is and everyone she loves.

*Discussion Questions excerpted from [www.amanetteansay.com](http://www.amanetteansay.com). Provided by the Mahopac Library.*