

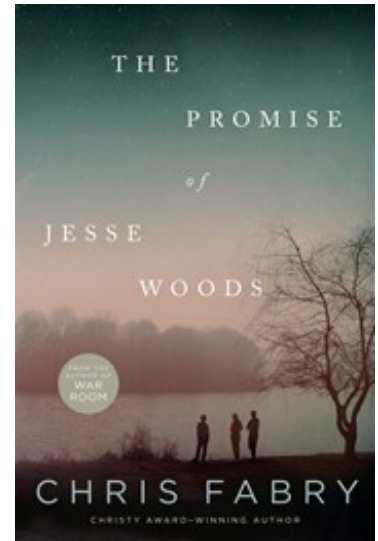
1. Is there a particular year or season that was pivotal in your own life, as the summer of 1972 was for Matt?

What was so important about that time?

2. When he calls with news of Jesse's engagement, Dickie says Matt owes it to Jesse to go back. Do you think he was right? Would you have counseled Matt to return to Dogwood? Why or why not?

3. Matt, Dickie, and Jesse bond partially because they are all outsiders in Dogwood society. How does being on the outside shape each of them? Can you think of a time when you didn't quite fit into a place or a group of people? How did it affect you?

4. Throughout the story, Matt highlights moments that he believes changed his future: He turned left his first day in Dogwood and saw the horse, eventually leading him to Jesse. He held on to his camera in the woods rather than dropping it. And on one fateful night, he followed Jesse instead of staying behind. How do you think each event would've changed if he'd made a different decision? Was Matt right to think of these as turning points?

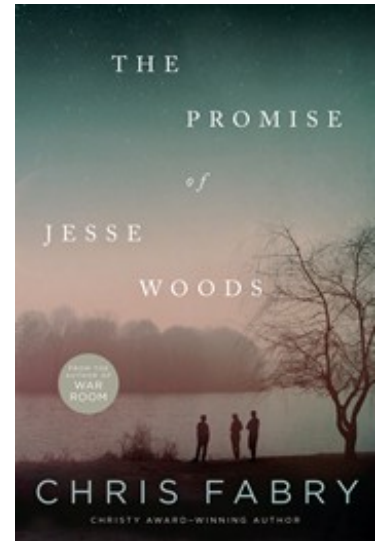


5. Describing his parents, Matt says, “I rarely saw them march together in my teenage years. Instead it was a push-pull, teeter-totter parenting method that left me disoriented, wondering which to trust and who was really on my side.” Where in the story do you see Matt’s parents demonstrate this dynamic? In the family you grew up in, what roles did your parents play? Did they “march together,” as Matt wishes his parents would’ve?

6. Why did Matt’s parents object so strongly to Jesse? What were they afraid of?

7. This story gives us several examples of the influence of fathers on their children—through Matt, Dickie, Jesse, Gentry Blackwood, even Earl Turley. What similarities do you see between each kid and his or her father? How have Matt’s conflicted feelings about his father colored his view of God? Did you agree when he told Jesse, “We’re all like our daddies”?

8. Mr. Lambert, one of Matt’s teachers, saw and channeled Matt’s talents when few others seemed to appreciate them, and even when Matt is an adult, his encouragement is “like water on a parched ground.” Is there someone who has played a similar role in your own life, as a mentor and champion? What did that person’s encouragement mean to you—and if he or she is still in your life, what does it mean now?



9. Both as a teen and as an adult, Matt is frustrated by his dad's dealings with Basil Blackwood. He believes his dad should stand up to Blackwood, while his dad says, "I think trying to get along with him and keeping peace is one way to show I'm taking God's Word seriously." Whose perspective do you agree with? How might things have been different for Calvin Plumley and his family if he'd stood up to Blackwood from the beginning?

10. One important theme in this book is that human beings make lousy saviors. In what ways does Matt try to play this role? Has there ever been anyone in your life you wanted to "save"? What happened with that relationship?

11. How important is it to always keep your promises? Do you think it can be true that, as Jesse said, "some promises cancel others"? Or are there good reasons for breaking some promises? Can you think of any examples?

12. What did you think of the story's ending? Did all involved make the right decisions? What do you imagine the future holds for Matt?

