

Shetland Mist Study Guide

By Heather Leslie Hammer

These questions are planned for small church groups or community book groups that meet for 7 sessions of 1 or 1½ hours each, but they can also be used by individual readers or for groups that meet for more or less time. Scripture reading and singing from *The United Methodist Hymnal (UMH)* may be included as suggested or not.

Recommendation: Do not read these questions before reading the chapters, or you will learn what happens in the story.

Session 1: Introductory Meeting

Read Matthew 6:34 from the *New Revised Standard Version*. The scripture passages in *Shetland Mist* are from the *King James Version*, as would be read in the 1800s. In general, I suggest participants read aloud from the *NRSV* in each session.

Shetland Mist is a story about a family living in a particular place in a particular time: the Shetland Islands in the 1800s. Find Shetland on a map and see how remote it is.

1. Invite participants to introduce themselves and share when and by what circumstances they came to live in their present community. Invite personal sharing with the idea of dividing the group time equally and keeping information shared in confidence.
2. Describe a time of hardship you have experienced. How did your faith carry you through?

Sing “Thou Hidden Source of Calm Repose” by Charles Wesley, *UMH* #153.
Read Chapters 1-2 in *Shetland Mist* for next time.

Session 2: Chapters 1-2

Read Luke 11:1-13. In *Shetland Mist*, Ann struggles how to pray. Note what Jesus says to do.

Chapter 1 “Ann and Robert”

1. What are your thoughts as you read Ann and Robert’s vows?
2. What do you think about Robert’s age? It is historically true that Robert was only sixteen when he married, though it was more common for the woman to be younger than the man. What do you think this says about Robert?
3. What sacrifices does Ann make to marry Robert? Compare her experience to yours.
4. What was Ann feeling as she left her parents’ home in Lerwick? Tell of a time you made a major life move.
5. How do you imagine “mist” to be a metaphor in the story?
6. What purpose do you think the “*Erlking*” poem gives to the text?
7. What role does Ann’s prayer life play in the book?

Chapter 2 “Jamie”

1. What experiences do you have of pregnancy, yours or someone else’s?

2. Describe Ann's location and her adjustment to croft life.
3. Have you felt isolated in a new community? Share the experience and what made you feel more integrated in the community over time?
4. Robert expresses his worries about his responsibilities. Can you identify with his concerns? How?
5. What toll does stress take in your life?
6. Ann is coming to understand that for her the core value of faith is love. How would you express what is most important to you in your faith or life?
7. At several times in the story Ann questions what God can do. When she asks herself, "Can God genuinely still a trembling heart?" she is questioning God's omnipotence. What do you think God can and cannot do?
8. When Madge offers to help Ann in childbirth, Ann attributes the assistance to God. Why?
9. Ann and Robert support the building of a new Methodist chapel. Have you supported a building program at your church? What tensions or benefits came from it?
10. Ann experiences life as learning to make the most of her resources, to tackle every new challenge, and to put her life in God's hands. How do you see your life?
11. When Ann prays for Robert, what do you think happens?
12. Ann and Robert seem to have different views about God's will. Do you believe all that happens is God's will?
13. Do you blame God for bad things that happen? In your family, do you differ in how you talk about illness and death?
14. Have you ever had trouble praying, as Ann does? What does she do about it?

Sing "Praise My Soul the King of Heaven" by Henry F. Lyte, *UMH* #66.

Read Chapters 3-5 for next time.

Session 3: Chapters 3-5

Read Luke 19:1-10 about Zacchaeus.

Chapter 3 "Tragedy"

1. Share about the death of someone in your family. How does it make you feel to talk about death?
2. Ann and Robert sing a favorite hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." How has God been a help to you?
3. Why do you think the author included both the fishing tragedy and Jamie's death in the same chapter?
4. After Jamie's death, Ann and Robert experienced deep grief. What unanswered questions often remain for a grieving family?
5. What memories are hard for you following the death of a family member or pet?
6. Ann uses literature to experience feelings vicariously. Is reading a spiritual practice for you? What spiritual disciplines have been helpful to you?
7. How does Ann use prayer after Jamie's death?
8. Ann's mother helps Ann visualize another image instead of fixating on Jamie's body when he died. What role can a therapist or friend play in a time of crisis?

Chapter 4 “Loss and Gain”

1. What is your concept of baptism? Does it have a purpose? Tell about where and when you were baptized, if you were.
2. Ann asks, “Who is Jesus?”—one of the big theological questions! How do you think of Jesus of Nazareth vs. Christ, the Messiah?
3. Tina develops a fever. You can imagine after losing one child, and experiencing other deaths in the family and community, parents would worry. Share a time when you worried about someone’s health.

Chapter 5 “Learning”

1. Robert wants to spend time playing his fiddle and learning new tunes. What role does music or another interest play in your life? Is your hobby ever a conflict in your family?
2. Ann feels pride in the family’s ability to make do. Do you regularly count your blessings?
3. Tina asks why we pray. How would you answer her?
4. How do you or your family attempt to put God first in your lives?

Sing “O, God, Our Help in Ages Past” by Isaac Watts, *UMH* #117.

Read Chapters 6-9 for next time.

Session 4: Chapters 6-9

Read and discuss the scripture passages: John 20:17, Thessalonians 5:1-11, Psalm 107:23-30.

Chapter 6 “The Valley of the Shadow of Death”

1. Robert says it felt like the preacher was speaking directly to him. Do you sometimes feel that way?
2. How do you experience Sunday worship?

Chapter 7 “Making Do”

1. Ann and Robert talk about family size. What are the issues that have come up in your family regarding having children?
2. James decides to go whaling in Greenland. When have you disagreed with a family member’s decision?
3. The fiddle is a prized possession in the Leslie family. Do you sing or play an instrument? Is music something passed on in your family?

Chapter 8 “Ebb and Flow”

1. Annie asks Ann about the age at which she married. Discuss the problems of finding a mate both in 19-century Shetland and today.
2. Describe a homecoming in your family.
3. Do you attribute safe homecoming to God, as Ann does in her prayer?

Chapter 9 “Gone to Sea”

1. Robert dies at sea at the age of 44. The average life expectancy in the British Isles in 1860 was 41 years. (It is 81 today in the U.K. and 77 in the U.S.A.) How long do you expect to live? How different would a spouse’s death be today from Robert’s death?
2. Have you experienced a sudden, tragic death? Tell what you are comfortable sharing.

Sing “Christ Whose Glory Fills the Sky” by Charles Wesley, *UMH* #173.
Read Chapters 10-12 for next time.

Session 5 Chapter 10-12

Read Psalm 23, Lamentations 3:19-26.

Chapter 10 “Mourning”

1. Tell how Anne copes after her husband and son are lost at sea. How have you dealt with bereavement?

Chapter 11 “Tears in the Heather”

1. Do you see any connections between the seasons, the weather, and the events of life in the Leslie family?
2. How are the disappearance of John and the deaths of Robert, James, Tina, and Mary different from Jamie’s death for Ann? What has been the most difficult death in your life experience?

Chapter 12 “Birth”

1. How does Hannah’s birth remind you of family relationships and experiences today?
2. What role does nature play in the story? Give examples.

Sing “Praise the Lord Who Reigns Above” by Charles Wesley, *UMH* #96.
Read Chapters 13-15 for next time.

Session 6 Chapters 13-15

Read 1 Samuel: 3.

Chapter 13 “Signs of Life”

1. What role does gratitude play in Ann’s faith?
2. What do you think about the ways the Leslie family feels about the trucking system (with lairds demanding tithe payments of fish, milk, and knitwear)? The Crofters’ Holding Act of 1886 finally allowed crofters to keep their land and no longer be beholden to the lairds.

Chapter 14 “The Laird”

1. How does the oppressive system of the lairds controlling the lives of crofters compare to situations of injustice today?
2. Do you find comfort in reading poetry or playing or listening to music?

Chapter 15 “Changes”

1. Which changes do you perceive today as good, and which as bad?
2. If you attend church, how do you experience worship? Does it change you?
3. What has happened for you when you have shared an intimate experience with other people in a confidential setting?

Sing “Out of the Depths I Cry to You” by Martin Luther, *UMH* #515.
Read Chapters 16-18 for next time.

Session 7, Chapters 16-18

Read Romans 8:24-30

Chapter 16 “Love”

1. “Grain stored and hope alive”—Can you remember a time when your economic future was at risk? What gave you hope?
2. Maggie’s marriage and Robert’s leaving for the *haaf* are moves toward independence. What have been the struggles in your family around finding one’s “course in life”?

Chapter 17 “Comings and Goings”

1. What was one of the most significant “comings and goings” in your life?
2. How do the changes in nature in the story reflect the “comings and goings” Ann and her family experience?

Chapter 18 “Partings”

1. How does the liturgical season of Holy Week and Easter fit the theme in *Shetland Mist*? What would you say is the theme, or message, of this book?
2. What might be some of the unspoken fears and hopes of each family member upon Robert’s departure? Do the hopes outweigh the fears?
3. Share what each person in the group liked about the experience of reading this book.

Sing “And Are We Yet Alive” by Charles Wesley, *UMH* #553.

End with a prayer of gratitude for the personal sharing in the group.

*May reading and discussing this story be a blessing to you.
Heather Leslie Hammer*