

One of Ours
Book Club Discussion Questions



1. All three brothers, Claude, Bayliss, and Ralph, are each unique. What ideas does each brother represent in the context of the time and era of the United States?
2. Many people talk about Cather's "Prairie Trilogy," which they consider to be her Nebraska novels—*O Pioneers!*, *My Ántonia*, and *The Song of the Lark*. How do you see this novel? Is it a Nebraska novel?
3. Enid is a character that many readers respond to—in various ways. What struck you most about Cather's portrayal of Enid? How does Enid compare to some of Cather's other female characters? What about Mahailey—how is her character meant to function in the novel? What does she give a reader or tell a reader that they do not get elsewhere in the novel?
4. When we think back on the historical context of this novel (both the time during which it was set and the time during which it was written), what surprised you about this novel? For a novel set during World War I, did your expectations differ from what Cather delivered? How does Cather's novel reflect the average American's experience of the war?
5. What did Claude struggle to find in his life before the war? What did he learn when he enlisted?
6. American identity is a common theme in many of Cather's writings, including essays such as "Nebraska: The End of the First Cycle" and "Roll Call on the Prairies," as well as the opening of *A Lost Lady*, "The Hired Girls" in *My Ántonia*, and the entirety of *O Pioneers!*. What does Cather feel about what it means to be an American? What it means to be an immigrant? The value of American culture?
7. What role does environment play in *One of Ours*? Cather's attention to Nebraska land and landscape in novels such as *O Pioneers!* and *My Ántonia* arguably leans toward reverence, but what is its importance in this book, when in many instances Claude is antagonistic toward Nebraska (and the farm, etc.)?
8. Cather scholar Blanche Gelfant writes, "*One of Ours* has always troubled Willa Cather's critics, who have either dismissed the novel, disparaged it, or discussed its 'deficiencies within a generic framework...Described variously as a war novel, a naturalistic novel, a social satire, or an Arthurian legend, it is either extraordinarily

complex, conflating, and transcending literary genres, or else inchoate—a troubled text seeking a form for its completion.” What do you take from this novel? What is it actually about?

9. *One of Ours* also gives us an important opportunity to talk about the similarities and differences between autobiographical matter and Cather’s fictional characterizations. How much weight do you as a reader give to an author’s autobiography and how it impacts a story? Do you read purely for the story?
10. *One of Ours* won the Pulitzer Prize for the novel in 1923. There was controversy surrounding the prize since the jurors felt pressure from the organization to select a novel instead of abstaining from giving the prize like they did in 1920. This led them to choose *One of Ours*, “without enthusiasm” as the winner. What made this a standout among other novels published that year? What might have caused hesitation from some of the jurors? Do you agree with their feelings toward the novel?
11. Cather also faced much criticism about her depiction of World War I and especially from some veterans. However, she did receive high praise from other veterans, as seen in her saved letters, which hail her novel as “true” and “truthful.” What makes this novel so different from other war novels? Were critics biased in thinking that an American woman, who did not see the war firsthand, could write such a descriptive narrative about the feelings and emotions of war?
12. Many novels like *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Catch-22*, and *A Farewell to Arms* are American classics that still get read and analyzed today. Does *One of Ours* still hold relevance today? What impact does it have on modern experiences of war? How does Cather’s take on war differ from these other representations?
13. Nearly all famous, American war novels were written by men. How do you think this impacted the reception of *One of Ours*? What makes Cather’s perspective different than others?
14. Cather is quoted saying, “I like best of my books the one that all the high-brow critics knock. In my opinion, *One of Ours* has more value in it than any one of the others.” Why do you think Cather liked this specific book so much?
15. What is the significance of David Gerhardt’s death? What would have changed if Claude knew about his death?