



# Colorado Book Club Resource

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR THE WOMAN ON THE STAIRS BY BERNHARD SCHLINK

1. Why do you think the author never gives the narrator a name?
2. How do you feel about Irene? Do you like her?
3. How are Schmidt and Gundlach foils of each other? Why does Gundlach keep damaging the painting?
4. What do you think of the contract between Schmidt and Gundlach? How would you feel if you were in Irene's position?
5. Were you surprised that Irene disappeared without a word to the narrator?
6. Who do you think really owned the painting?
7. Irene says with contempt: "For Gundlach I was the young, blonde, beautiful trophy, only the packaging counted. For Schwind, I was a muse, the packaging was enough for that too. Then you came along. A woman's third stupid role, after the trophy and the muse, is the damsel in distress who must be rescued by the prince. To stop her falling into the hands of the villain, the prince takes her into his own hands. After all, she belongs in the hands of some man" (p. 86). What do you think about her summation of a woman's roles?
8. Do you think the narrator is still naïve when he goes to the island? What does he expect to happen versus what actually does?
9. How is the older Irene's life on Red Cove different from her younger self (in part one)?
10. The narrator gives the argument that "The value of life remains a mystery to me. How can one define the value of something lost, if the person who has lost it doesn't miss it?" (97). What do you think of that sentiment?
11. "Or is it the small defeats that we can't get over? . . . The big early defeats change the course of our lives. The small ones don't change us, but they stay with us and torment us, little thorns in our side" (p. 133-134). Do you agree with the narrator?
12. When the four main players meet again at the house in the cove, who has changed the most? The least?
13. What do you think of the character of Kari? What does the author use him to demonstrate?



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14. Irene became a nurse and took in stray children after she left Schmidt. Does this make her a more sympathetic character in your eyes?
15. Why do you think the author never explains what Irene's crime was? What was the purpose of including that as part of the plot?
16. Do you think the narrator and Irene loved each other at the end of the book? Why or why not?

*Questions from [penguinrandomhouse.com](http://penguinrandomhouse.com)*



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