

## **Down from Cascom Mountain**

### **By Ann Joslin Williams**

These discussion questions are designed to enhance your group's conversation about *Down from Cascom Mountain*, a touching novel about love and loss on a New Hampshire mountaintop.

#### **About this book**

*Down from Cascom Mountain* is set in Leah, New Hampshire, the town that Ann Joslin Williams's father, the writer Thomas Williams, invented in his fiction. Leah is a rural town next to Cascom Mountain, filled with beautiful but dangerous trails and cliffs. Mary Hall, who worked two summers at the local mountain lodge as a teenager, discovered the body of a boy who died of hypothermia. And a decade later, Mary watches helplessly as her new husband, Michael, plunges to his death from one of the mountain's treacherous cliffs. Mary is left by herself in Leah—except for Tobin, a teenage neighbor who appoints himself Mary's protector.

Callie is a teenager who has a lot in common with Mary—she has the same job at the lodge that Mary had at her age. And like Mary did at her age, Callie is sleeping with the crew boss at the lodge. Both Mary and Callie develop crushes on the same man—Ben, the fire watchman who lives in solitude at the top of the mountain. When Callie suspects that she is pregnant, she finds she has no one to turn to—Mary has found solace from her grief in Ben's arms. In her desperation, Callie loses her way on Cascom's winding trails, and she must use her wits to make it off the mountain alive.

#### **For discussion**

1. Discuss the prologue of *Down from Cascom Mountain*. What was Mary Hall like as a teenager? What kinds of formative experiences did she have while working at the lodge? How do her first brushes with love and death influence her later in life?
2. Consider the landscape of Leah, New Hampshire and Cascom Mountain. What dangers lurk in the landscape's trails, forests, and cliffs? What solace do Mary, Callie, Ben, and Tobin find within this landscape?
3. Describe Tobin's complicated relationships with the women of the novel: his mother, Mary, and Callie. Why does Tobin appoint himself Mary's protector? Why doesn't his father protect him from his mother? Why does Callie, too, need Tobin's protection?
4. Discuss the brief marriage of Mary and Michael, who only knew each other for nine months before Michael's fatal accident. What attracted Mary and Michael to each other initially? How did they fall in love so quickly?
5. Discuss Mary's mourning process. What helps her cope during the painful first months of her life without Michael? How does her appearance and demeanor change during mourning, and when does she start to look and feel more like her former self?

6. After Callie loses her virginity to Spencer, a man she does not love, “she’d given all the demons in the world the right to chase her down the minute she’d dared to mock love” (51). Why does Callie decide to sleep with Spencer if she doesn’t love him? What complications result from their affair?
7. When Mary and Callie realize all that they have in common, “They were like doppelgangers, or just girls on the same path, one older than the other. Mary ahead, Callie behind” (110). Name the similarities between Mary and Callie. What are some differences between their lives—where do their paths diverge?
8. Describe Callie’s feeling of “dark-gloom.” Why does Callie tell Mary about dark-gloom, and how is Mary able to relate to it? When is Callie overcome with dark-gloom, and when is she able to identify another feeling, “blue-kindness” (248)?
9. When Ben tells Mary about the accidental death of his girlfriend, he says, “Grief, side by side, diminishes each” (166). Discuss how Ben and Mary are able to help each other through periods of grief. Do they have mixed feelings about their physical relationship? Why or why not?
10. When Callie takes Clayton Walker up Cascom Mountain to view the site of Michael’s death, there are two sets of eyes secretly watching them: Mary’s and Tobin’s. Discuss the interactions of these four characters—Callie, Clayton, Mary, and Tobin—on this afternoon. Who is watching whom, and for what reasons?
11. Clayton Walker reveals two things that Mary didn’t know about Michael: He put a baby up for adoption in his teens, and he was caught in the middle of his father’s extra-marital affair. How does Mary feel when she realizes Michael never told her these two things? Why might Michael have held back when talking about his past? Has Mary kept anything from Michael during their short marriage?
12. Compare how Mary and Callie react when each woman discovers she might be pregnant. Who does Mary turn to for help? Who does Callie turn to? How does each woman cope with the risks and disappointments of becoming pregnant?
13. When Mary thinks back to her childhood and her parents, she realizes, “The mountain had raised her as much as they had” (282). What kind of relationship did Mary have with her mother and father? Why did Mary feel excluded from their love, and how did her relationship with her parents change when she grew up?
14. Two search parties climb up Cascom Mountain in the novel: young Mary and the Lo-House crew search for Anna Kimball in the prologue, and Mary and Clayton ascend the mountain looking for Callie when she goes off trail. How are these two scenes similar and how are they different?

15. When Callie e-mails Mary a picture of an albino named Anna Kimball, Mary “hit delete. No need for resurrection, for going back. Whoever she was, she’d vanished” (324). Why does Mary decide not to look at Anna Kimball’s picture?
16. Although *Down from Cascom Mountain* ends with Mary and Ben parting ways and Callie waiting for an appointment at an abortion clinic, the novel ends on a note of hope. What does the future seem to hold for Mary, Ben, Callie, and Tobin? Are these characters likely to meet again? Why or why not?

### **Suggested reading**

Ann Joslin Williams, *The Woman in the Woods*; Thomas Williams, *The Hair of Harold Roux*; John Irving, *Last Night in Twisted River*; Carol Edgarian, *Three Stages of Amazement*; Jo-Ann Mapson, *Solomon’s Oak*; Francisco Goldman, *Say Her Name*; Ann Packer, *Swim Back to Me*; Elizabeth Strout, *Olive Kitteridge*; Joyce Carol Oates, *A Widow’s Story*; Philip Connors, *Fire Season*; Julie Orringer, *How to Breathe Underwater*; Mary Gordon, *The Love of My Youth*

**Ann Joslin Williams** grew up in New Hampshire. She earned her MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, and was a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University. She is the author of *The Woman in the Woods*, a collection of linked stories, which won the 2005 Spokane Prize for Short Fiction, and her work has appeared in *StoryQuarterly*, the *Iowa Review*, the *Missouri Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She was awarded an NEA grant for her work on *Down from Cascom Mountain*. Williams works as an assistant professor at the University of New Hampshire.