

• THE GIRLY BOOK CLUB •
ONCE UPON A RIVER

BY DIANE SETTERFIELD

1. Did you enjoy this book? Rate it out of 5.
2. The Swan Inn, Buscot Lodge, and the towns and villages along the river Thames have a specific atmosphere for the story that unfolds. What role does the Swan itself play? Could this story have taken place anywhere else?
3. Consider the importance of family in the novel. What does it mean to Robert Armstrong? What does family mean to Daunt and Rita? And Victor? What about Lily?
4. By the time Vaughan had written a concise two-page account of Amelia's kidnapping to his father in New Zealand, "the horror of it was quite excised." What effect does the act of storytelling have on Vaughan? What about the other characters?
5. Storytelling is central to *Once Upon a River*. The story of Quietly the ferryman is an invention of the author, but it contains many elements from traditional or mythological tales. Does it remind you of any other stories in particular?
6. Folk beliefs are still alive on the riverbank—changelings, witches, and dragons are all still real to some, and the Armstrongs believe Bess has a Seeing eye. What are the real-life consequences of these stories? Which characters have faith in these stories, and which do not? How does it affect their actions?
7. In the context of women's lives in the nineteenth century, what do you make of Rita's reluctance to marry? What brings her to reconsider?
8. The identity of the girl is one of the driving mysteries of *Once Upon a River*. What were your early thoughts about who she really was, and did they alter as the story developed? What did you think of the way this question was resolved at the end?
9. The ending elaborates on the "return to life" of children apparently drowned. Did this come as a surprise to you?