

The Gold Fish
By Barbara Ward Thall
Book Club Discussion Guide

In some respects, Barbie's childhood had its difficulties. What were some of its advantages?

Who were your favorite characters? And why?

Was Joan harder on Barbie than her other children? If so, how? And why?

Joan resents Barbie's servitude and observational powers, and muses that "it was her daughter, perhaps, who shouldn't trust *her*. Why would she say that? Is it true?

Barbie's grandmother Hazel, as well as Catholic nuns, were at the top of Barbie's "do not trust" list. Why was it necessary for Barbie to keep a list?

Barbie's father, Don, is described as a total "dud," and that the only thing he did as a father was "the doing of absolutely nothing." Is that fair?

Did Barbie get anything from Don that she didn't get from her mother?

It could be argued that both Barbie and Don were "entrepreneurs." What qualities did they share that helped or hurt them in their endeavors?

Did the revelations about Don's childhood and spinal condition change your opinion of him? Did it change your opinion of his gambling? Would Don have been a gambler regardless of his upbringing and situation?

Did the revelations about Joan's childhood and encounter with Father O'Connell change your opinion of her?

Why did Barbie believe her gold fish was magic? *Was* the gold fish magic?

Why did Barbie feel the need to retreat to her underwater world?

What was the significance of the color orange or gold in the novel?

Money has a big role in *The Gold Fish*. In what ways is it a positive and/or negative factor in the lives of various characters?

What true “coming-of-age” realizations does Barbie have throughout the novel?

What did Barbie get from her friendship from Mr. Charles? Why was his presence so important in the novel?

The themes of Catholic guilt, shame, and punishment run through the novel. What mark(s) did the Church leave on both Barbie and Joan? Do you think these themes still resonate today as much as they did in 1972?

With multiple mentions of axe-murderers and perverts, was 1972 a safer, or more dangerous world than today?

J.R.R. Tolkien’s “*The Hobbit*” is mentioned numerous times in the novel. What parallels can be drawn between it and Barbie’s story?

What does the character of Wesley represent to Barbie?

What does “creativity wants out” mean? Why did Barbie want to “do stuff?”

Barbie had two good friends in the novel: Bridge and Erin. How were they different? How were they the same?

At the end of the novel, Barbie talks about her upside-down underwater house and says to Karen, “I know where the air is.” What does she mean?

At the end of the novel, have Barbie and/or the rest of the family changed?