

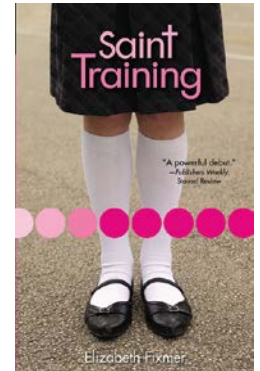
Saint Training

Discussion Guide for the book by Elizabeth Fixmer

FOR DISCUSSION

QUESTIONS FOR YOUNGER READERS (grades 6-8):

1. The **FIRST PERSON NARRATOR** and **PROTAGONIST** of *Saint Training* is Mary Clare O'Brian. How does her **NARRATION** impact the story? How would the story be different if her mother, her father, one of her siblings, or her friend Joannie had told the story?
2. On page 14 as Mary Clare and her sisters say their prayers, we are introduced to their **FAMILY**: "...Mommy, Daddy, Matthew, Mark, Luke, Mary Clare, Anne, Gabriella, Margaret, Martha, and Johnny." In an almost inaudible whisper, Gabriella added, 'And God bless the baby in Mommy's tummy.'" Mary Clare belongs to a large **FAMILY**. What are some of the pros and cons for Mary Clare of belonging to this large **FAMILY**? Give examples from *Saint Training* to support your ideas. Talk about the relationships that Mary Clare has with the individual members of her **FAMILY**. Compare your **FAMILY** and your relationships with your own **FAMILY** members to Mary Clare and her family.
3. *Saint Training* is an example of **HISTORICAL FICTION**. What do you know about the **1960s**? Do some research on this time period. Describe the fashion of the time, the products people used, important events, etc. For instance, check out PBS's "The Sixties: The Years That Shaped a Generation" at: <http://www.pbs.org/opb/thesixties/index.html>. Be sure to look up those details found in *Saint Training* that you are unfamiliar with. For instance, do you know what Dippity-do™ was? A transistor radio? Ed Sullivan? A typewriter?
4. The **VIETNAM WAR** was intensifying in 1967 when the story is set. Do some research on the **VIETNAM WAR**. For example, take a look at "American Experience: Vietnam Online," produced by PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/vietnam/>. In what ways does the **VIETNAM WAR** affect Mary Clare, her family, and her community?
5. **MUSIC** plays an important role in the lives of the O'Brian family. On page 91, Mary Clare says, "It was amazing, the power that **MUSIC** held to bring them together." Look up the songs mentioned in *Saint Training* – lyrics, videos of the original musicians playing them, or the recordings. Perhaps make a playlist of the **MUSIC** mentioned in *Saint Training* (Woody Guthrie, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Bob Dylan, the Monkees, the Singing Nun, the Beatles, etc.). What does this **MUSIC** tell you about American life in 1967?
6. Discuss Mary Clare's **RELATIONSHIPS** with her sixth grade classmates. For instance, think about her **RELATIONSHIPS** with Kelly, with Joannie, and with Gregory. How do these **RELATIONSHIPS** change throughout *Saint Training* and why do they change?
7. Mary Clare tries really hard to be perfect so that she can become first a nun, then a Mother Superior, and then a **SAINT**. What are some of the things she does well in her efforts to be a good person? What are some things she struggles with? In the end, do you think she succeeds in her efforts to be perfect? What does she learn about herself in the process?



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8. Describe the **GENDER ROLES** of the 1960s, in the Catholic Church, and in Mary Clare's family. How do the **ROLES** of men and women differ? How do those **ROLES** begin to change in *Saint Training*? What impact does this have on Mary Clare's life? Compare these roles to the **ROLES** of men and women in America today.
9. What are some of the **THEMES** found in *Saint Training*? For instance, what do we learn about loss, grief, self-acceptance, faith, friendship, family, and modesty in *Saint Training*?
10. When her class is told about the **ESSAY CONTEST** where they are asked to discuss, "What a Religious Vocation Means to Me," Mary Clare determines that she must win the contest. Why? What does she write about in the first round (see page 80)? What does she write about in her addendum essay (see page 232)? What do the two essays show us about how Mary Clare has changed?

QUESTIONS FOR OLDER READERS (grade 9 and up):

1. *Saint Training* is based on author Elizabeth Fixmer's own experience as a young **CATHOLIC** girl attending a parochial school in the 1960s. In what ways do her experiences impact *Saint Training*? Is an understanding of the **CATHOLIC** faith necessary to the reader's understanding of the novel? If so, explore terms like:
 - Good Shepherd nuns
 - habit
 - Mother Superior
 - venial sins versus mortal sins
 - seminary
 - pagan
 - scapular
 - missal
 - Mass
 - confession
 - Act of Contrition
 - Purgatory
 - rosary
 - Holy Days of Obligation
 - mortification of the flesh
 - martyr
 - the Memorare
 - religious

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2. As the 1960s were a turbulent time throughout much of the world, they were a turbulent time in the Catholic Church as well. **VATICAN II** brought about many significant changes to the Church, which divided Catholics. Some made the case that, though those changes were significant, they didn't go far enough. Others felt that the changes were too radical. Discuss what you know about **VATICAN II**, and/or do some research on the topic. What do the experiences of the O'Brians, in the midst of this turbulence, tell the reader?
3. Mary Clare begins by revealing to the reader her desire to become a nun, then a Mother Superior, and then a saint. Why does she want to become a saint? Discuss her **FAITH** journey, her growing understanding of what this requires, and her ultimate decision on page 205 to "...be a regular person who tries to do good things."
4. Elizabeth Fixmer employs **PERIOD DETAIL** to bring life in 1967 Wisconsin alive for the reader in this work of **HISTORICAL FICTION**. Consider lines like, "Her own head was throbbing from the soup cans she had wound tightly around her hair" (p. 13), "Mary Clare laughed. She had seen the flower children on television holding signs that said 'Make love not war'" (p. 50), and "...Margaret was slicking Johnny's hair back with a huge gob of Dippity-do™, the sticky, icky hair-styling gel" (p. 92). Do these details effectively paint a picture of American life of the 1960s for the reader? Discuss.
5. There are many examples of **IRONY** in *Saint Training*. For instance, Sister Agnes calls Mary Clare into the office, hands her a sealed envelope and tells her to, "Give this to your parents – and don't open it. It's none of your business." Then Sister Agnes says to her, "I have bills to pay. Good Catholics pay their bills on time. I'm tired of having to get after your parents for tuition, books – and now this. If your parents want to see Gabriella be the only one in her First Communion class to walk down the aisle without a missal and rosary..." (pp. 21-2) Give more examples of **IRONY** found in the novel and discuss their impact on the novel.
6. The issue of **BIRTH CONTROL** is a significant storyline in the novel. Discuss the Catholic Church's teachings on **BIRTH CONTROL** and its impact on the O'Brian family, particularly on Mary Clare's mother. Discuss the larger picture, in terms of advancements in **BIRTH CONTROL**, and the changing attitude towards **BIRTH CONTROL** during the "**SEXUAL REVOLUTION**" of the 1960s.
7. Fixmer uses **HUMOR** to lighten the tone of *Saint Training*. For instance, when Mary Clare goes to confession, the priest knows immediately that it is her, even though he can't see her. When she inquires as to how he knew it was her, he says, "You're my only parishioner who defends her sins while confessing them." Discuss more examples of **HUMOR** used in the novel and their effect on the storyline.
8. **HUMILITY** is defined at dictionary.com as, "the quality or condition of being humble; modest opinion or estimate of one's own importance, rank, etc." On page 67, Mother Monica tells Mary Clare, "About **HUMILITY**. My dear Mary Clare, **HUMILITY** is not acting, but a way of being in the world. The person with **HUMILITY** should know her own strengths and recognize them for what they are – gifts from God. Then she should use those gifts to serve God." Discuss the significance of **HUMILITY** and **MODESTY** as a **THEME** in *Saint Training*.

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9. The **WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT** of the 1960s is another underlying **THEME** found in *Saint Training*. Mary Clare's mother is reading Betty Freidan's, *The Feminine Mystique*, a pivotal work published in 1963. How does it impact her thinking and her actions? Discuss the traditional role of females in the Catholic Church as compared to that of males in the Catholic Church at the time the novel is set, as well as the role of women in general. Reread Mary Clare's thoughts on page 77 where she compares the roles of nuns to those of priests, and on page 79 where she asks her mother why she is reading the Freidan book. How is Mary Clare's mother's journey a parallel representation of what was happening with women in America in general at this time? Compare the role of women in the 1960s to the role of women in the 21st century. What has changed? What has not?
10. Discuss the letters between Mary Clare and Mother Monica. How does the **EPISTOLARY** nature of the writing impact the story? What does Mary Clare learn through her relationship with Mother Monica, especially about the Religious?
11. **MUSIC** plays a central role in the lives of the O'Brian family. On page 91, Mary Clare says, "It was amazing, the power that **MUSIC** held to bring them together..." Look up the songs mentioned in *Saint Training* – lyrics, videos of the original musicians playing them, or the recordings. In what ways does the **MUSIC** of the 1960s tell the story of that time period? For instance, take a look at this recording of Peter, Paul, and Mary singing "Puff the Magic Dragon" on BBC in 1965: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RC2tlNmz4ao>. Perhaps make a playlist of the **MUSIC** mentioned in *Saint Training* (Woody Guthrie, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Bob Dylan, the Monkees, the Singing Nun, the Beatles, etc.). In what ways does **MUSIC** enhance *Saint Training*?
12. What does Mary Clare's **RELATIONSHIP** with Joannie reveal about her? What impact does it have on her popularity? How does she remedy this? Are Mary Clare's actions and feelings in regards to her **RELATIONSHIPS** with her peers typical or atypical for children her age? Explain.
13. What methods does Sister Agnes (Agony) use to **CONTROL** others? Broaden your discussion to include the Catholic Church (or any other organized religion), the government, etc. Refer to Mother Monica's letter on page 121 where she says, "When the Church was primarily focused on sin, purgatory, and hell, it was because of the belief that people obey out of fear. So if people feared God they would obey. We know now that people obey out of love and that love is a much better motivator." Discuss 21st century organized groups that operate under the ideology that fear leads to obedience.
14. The complexities and impact of the **VIETNAM WAR** on America at the time, on this community, and on these characters is another sub-plot and **THEME** found in *Saint Training*. Discuss the varying viewpoints on the war found in the book. What is Matthew's stance (conscientious objector/pacifist), his dad's stance, Mark's stance, the stance of the Catholic Church, and Flipper's stance. Finally, what is Mary Clare's stance on the **WAR IN VIETNAM**? Is a child of eleven, even of seventeen or eighteen, able to fully understand **WAR** and all of its intricacies and consequences? Discuss. How do the varying viewpoints of the characters on the **VIETNAM WAR** impact their relationships?
15. The discussion of the Civil Rights Movement in *Saint Training* is particularly timely, as Americans recognize the 50th anniversary of several pivotal events in our Civil Rights history. Investigate **FATHER JAMES GROPP** of Milwaukee. For instance, explore the information found at the Wisconsin

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Historical Society: <http://badgerbios.blogspot.com/p/father-groppi-whs-collections-james.html>. What was the significance of **FATHER GROPPI'S** involvement in the Civil Rights Movement? Is the inclusion of his work in *Saint Training* necessary to the story? In what ways does it enhance or hinder the story being told?

16. On page 131, Mrs. Turner says, "Everybody thinks their **RELIGION** is the true **RELIGION**." Discuss this idea as it relates to *Saint Training*, as well as its implications in our present day world.
17. When Mary Clare's **MOTHER** makes the decision to go to school to become a teacher, what impact does this decision have in the community, on Mr. O'Brian, on the O'Brian family, and on Mary Clare specifically? In what ways is her decision beneficial and to whom? In what ways does it create difficulties? What are the **IRONIES** in her discussion with Mary Clare and her role in this decision? Refer to the discussion between Mrs. O'Brian and Mary Clare on pages 149-52.
18. Describe Mary Clare's relationship with her **FATHER**. Do you think their relationship is typical or unique for the times? On their trip to meet Mother Monica, Mary Clare thinks, "Something new and fragile was taking shape in her relationship with him. A union of minds. A kinship she hadn't felt until now" (p. 185). How does their relationship change over the course of the novel?
19. Reread Mary Clare's **DIOCESAN ESSAY ADDENDUM** on pages 232-3. It clearly and honestly shows us where her journey has taken her and what she has learned from that journey. Do you think Mary Clare will win the essay contest? Why or why not?

ADDITIONAL READING:

Nest by Esther Erlich (2014)

Okay for Now by Gary Schmidt (2011)

Countdown (2010) or *Revolution* (2014) by Deborah Wiles

ABOUT AUTHOR ELIZABETH FIXMER:

Elizabeth Fixmer earned her Master of Fine Arts in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Hamline University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is the author of two books for Young Adults, *Saint Training* and *Down from the Mountain*. Fixmer is currently at work in Southern Wisconsin on a third book for teens, *Mercy*.

Ms. Fixmer describes *Saint Training* as "loosely autobiographical." Though it is a work of fiction, many elements found in *Saint Training* are true. Check-out Ms. Fixmer's website for her discussion of how her own experiences influenced the writing of *Saint Training*:

http://www.elizabethfixmer.com/books/bk_saint_training.html.

Other interests of Ms. Fixmer's include her pets, food, and the arts.