

## Book Club Discussion Guide



*The Frozen River by Ariel Lawhon, Page 1 (March 2024)*

# The Frozen River

By Ariel Lawhon

## About the author:

Ariel Lawhon is a critically acclaimed, New York Times bestselling author of historical fiction. Her novels include: *THE WIFE THE MAID AND THE MISTRESS*; *FLIGHT OF DREAMS*; *I WAS ANASTASIA*; *CODE NAME HÉLÈNE*; *THE FROZEN RIVER* (coming December 2023); and *WHEN WE HAD WINGS* (co-written with Kristina McMorris and Susan Meissner). Her books have been translated into numerous languages and have been Library Reads, One Book One County, Indie Next, Costco, Amazon Spotlight, and Book of the Month Club selections. She lives in the rolling hills outside Nashville, Tennessee, with her husband and four sons. She splits her time between the grocery store and the baseball field.

Source: <https://www.ariellawhon.com/about/>

## About this book:

From the New York Times bestselling author of *I Was Anastasia* and *Code Name Hélène* comes a gripping historical mystery inspired by the life and diary of Martha Ballard, a renowned 18th-century midwife who investigates a shocking murder that unhinges her small community.

Maine, 1789: The Kennebec River freezes, entombing a man in the ice. Martha Ballard is summoned to examine the body and determine cause of death. As the local midwife and healer, Martha is good at keeping secrets. Her diary is a record of every birth and death, every murder and debacle that unfolds in the town of Hallowell. In that diary she also

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documented the details of an alleged rape that occurred four months earlier. Now, one of the men accused of that heinous attack has been found dead in the ice.

While Martha is certain she knows what happened the night of the assault, she suspects that the two crimes are linked, and that there is more to both cases than meets the eye. Over the course of one long, hard winter, as the trial nears, and whispers and prejudices mount, Martha's diary lands at the center of the scandal and threatens to tear both her family and her community apart.

In her newest offering, Ariel Lawhon brings to life a brave and compassionate unsung heroine who refused to accept anything less than justice on behalf of those no one else would protect. *The Frozen River* is a thrilling, tense, and tender story of a remarkable woman who had the courage to take a stand, and in the process wrote herself into American history.

Source: <https://www.ariellawhon.com/thefrozenriver/>

### Discussion Questions:

1. How did life in Hallowell in 1789 surprise you? Did the characters act as you expected for the historical period? What revelations were most interesting to you? How does our contemporary notion of the American dream apply to these characters?
2. Throughout the novel, Martha is frequently called to deliver babies from women of all walks of life. Have you or anyone you know delivered a child with the assistance of a midwife? Which laboring mother did you feel most connected to?
3. "Memory is a wicked thing that warps and twists. But paper and ink receive the truth without emotion, and they read it back without partiality." (p 39) Martha's diary is a critical component of the novel, and a key piece of evidence in Rebecca's trial. Have you ever kept a diary? If not, did reading *The Frozen River* influence you to start?

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4. Much of the novel's action focuses on the legal process surrounding Rebecca Forster's assault and Martha's testimony. Were you surprised at the way the 18th century judicial process unfolded? Do you think Rebecca's story would have been received differently in a contemporary courtroom?
5. The Ballards are an incredibly closeknit family—did you have a favorite character among Martha and Ephraim's brood? Was there a relationship between one of Martha's children and their suitors that you were particularly cheering for?
6. Experts are few and far between in Hallowell, making Martha and Doctor's medical knowledge all the more important, and making Doctor Page's poor advice especially dangerous. Would you have acted differently in Martha's place to warn the townspeople about Page?
7. Martha and her daughters spend much of the novel immersed in everyday household labor such as making candles, baking bread, weaving, and killing chickens. Were there any 1780s tasks you'd be interested to try for yourself?
8. What did you think of the way Martha and Ephraim's past is revealed in the interstitial chapters? What did those glimpses of their earlier years reveal about them as the 1789 story unfolded? Which moments in their love story struck you most deeply?
9. Martha says the townspeople dislike her. Ephraim disagrees: "They respect you. Perhaps occasionally fear you. It's not the same thing." (p 56) When is it better to be honest than it is to be well liked?
10. Sally and Sarah are set up in opposition to each other throughout the novel, and Martha guesses incorrectly about both of their futures. Did you see those plot twists coming? Would you have acted differently toward either woman if you had been in Martha's shoes?

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11. Martha's final confrontation with North has lasting consequences for both of them. Do you think justice was done? What about as regards Rebecca's assault and Burgess's killing? Would you have made the same choice as Martha?

12. If *The Frozen River* was adapted for film or television, who would you cast in the leading roles? Are there any components of the story you think would be especially striking to see acted out on screen?

13. Did you read the author's note? If so, did it change your evaluation of Martha's life and the story of the "year of the long winter?"

Source: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/665611/the-frozen-river-by-ariel-lawhon/9780385546874/readers-guide/>