

Study Guide: Anna's World

by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin

THE BASICS

About the Authors:

Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin are a married couple who love writing books together. Their stories for young readers include science fiction, fantasy, historical fiction, retold myths, and plays. They've also collaborated on many nonfiction books about history, literature, and mythology for use in school libraries and classrooms.

Pat and Wim have lived in various parts of the United States, and now they live in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, Mexico with their adopted Mexican daughter, Monse. Pat and Wim also manage a scholarship program for Mexican students, sponsored by the San Miguel chapter of International PEN.

For more about Pat and Wim, and to learn about their novels and plays for young readers, visit www.chironbooks.com

About the Inspiration:

During the early 1980s, Wim Coleman was approached by a composer to write an opera libretto about the Shakers. Wim learned a lot about the Shakers and wrote the libretto, but the composer never got around to writing the music. Nevertheless, that was the beginning of Wim's fascination with the people called Shakers—their religion, their lifestyle, their ideals, and their history.

In the mid-1990s, Wim compiled, introduced, and edited a book of source materials about the Shakers. By then, he was married to the writer and artist Pat Perrin, and together they were writing many books together, including novels. They began to mull over ideas for a novel about the Shakers.

In 1998, Pat and Wim moved to Mexico. As they befriended working class Mexicans, they came face to face with poverty and social injustice. Oddly enough, their life in Mexico made them think more and more about the Shakers—especially the sect's quest for a fair and just society. At last, the story of *Anna's World* came to them, and they wrote the book.

About the Story:

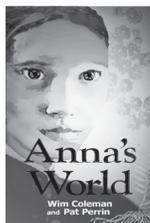
It's 1845. When a flood destroyed Anna's home and her father's business, she almost died of typhoid. Anna's father has left her in a Shaker community while he tries to build a new business.

The Shakers have far too many rules for fourteen-year-old Anna. Even so, she admires her brilliant schoolteacher and meets remarkable visitors from the outside world, including Henry David Thoreau. Anna helps a friend elope and makes the dangerous discovery that a Shaker storekeeper is a thief.

Finally, Anna's father sends for her to live with him and his new wife in Boston. Finding her new life superficial and boring, Anna sneaks out for a lecture by Thoreau, who reveals some dreadful truths about slavery and America's war against Mexico.

Anna discovers that her father is manufacturing munitions for the war, and that his business partner is the Shaker thief. She escapes the man's attempt to kill her, but is then faced with a staggering choice—whether to live an idle life or to return to the rule-bound but idealistic Shakers.

The story ends in 1888, as an older Anna Coburn reflects upon her strange but rewarding life as Sister Anna, a Shaker.



THE CHARACTERS

Anna Coburn

14 years old at the beginning of the book; she has spent her childhood with her widower father and is sent to live with the Shakers in Goshen.

Brant Coburn

Anna's father, a bankrupt store owner who becomes a millionaire munitions manufacturer.

Ruth Curtis

One of Anna's roommates in Goshen; anxious and deeply religious.

Betty Mather

Another of Anna's roommates; a cheerful teenaged girl, the first African American Anna has ever known.

Beryl Thornton

Another of Anna's roommates; sickly and weak.

Sister Sally Crane

A friend of Anna's; very unhappy among the Shakers.

Sister Zenobia Rowe

Anna's schoolteacher; once a well-known intellectual and poet.

Henry David Thoreau

A poet and transcendentalist thinker; an actual historical figure (1817-1862).

Brother Seth Edwards

A Shaker shopkeeper who masks his crookedness with charm and cheerfulness.

Sister Louise

A rule-abiding Shaker woman.

Elder Nathan

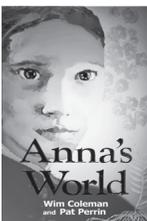
Together with Eldress Clara, the leader of the Shaker community of Goshen.

Eldress Clara

Together with Elder Nathan, the leader of the Shaker community of Goshen.

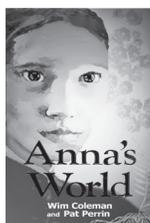
Emily Coburn

Anna's stepmother, in her early twenties.



QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- List some of the ways that Shakers use the word “gift.” Describe a time when you received or gave a gift that seemed more than ordinary.
- Fourteen-year-old Anna is already thought of as a woman among the Shakers. When do you think people really reach adulthood? Explain your response.
- Shaker life is described as having “hundreds of rules.” Which of these rules seem important to you? Unimportant? How do you feel about some of the rules in your own world?
- As Anna listens to Sister Zenobia’s poem, she finds herself thinking that most people “ungrow” during their lives. What does Anna mean by this? Describe what you think it would be like to truly grow throughout one’s life.
- Thoreau remembers Sister Zenobia as a brilliant young woman who wrote many books and liked to wear beautiful flowers. Why do you think such a woman would choose to join the Shakers?
- Thoreau believes in a life of solitude and self-reliance; the Shakers believe in a life of comradeship and sharing. Which kind of life seems better to you? Why does that kind of life appeal to you?
- The Shakers tried to create their own utopia—a perfect society. How well do you think they succeeded? What do you think a true utopia would be like?
- In her sermon of “the Fourth Light,” Eldress Clara explains the religious beliefs of the Shakers. Sum up these beliefs in your own words. How are they alike or different from the beliefs of other religions you are familiar with?
- Why does Anna decide to help Sally exchange letters with her fiancé, then to help Sally meet him? Would you have done the same thing in Anna’s situation? Why or why not?
- During her two-year stay in Goshen, what does Anna like about Shaker life? What does she dislike? How would you feel if you had to spend a long time among the Shakers?
- Ralph Waldo Emerson says that the Shakers are communists, while Nathaniel Hawthorne insists that they are capitalists. What do the words communist and capitalist mean to you? Which of the two characters—Emerson or Hawthorne—do you most agree with, and why?
- “Do you ever feel strangely, achingly alone—even among your dearest friends?” Henry Thoreau asks Anna. “Perhaps *especially* among your dearest friends?” Describe a time when you felt isolated from people you knew.
- During her childhood, Anna’s felt close to her father; when she goes to live with him in Boston, she finds him cold and distant. Why do you think their relationship changes? Have you ever felt a disturbing change in a relationship with a friend or loved one? Describe what happened.
- When Anna goes to Boston, she sees extremes of poverty and wealth for the first time in her life. After two years among the Shakers, how does this make her feel? How do you feel about the way in which wealth is distributed in today’s world?
- If you were a teenager in the 1840s, which would you prefer: life in Goshen, or life in Boston? Explain your response.
- How has American family life changed since the time of *Anna’s World*—especially the duties and expectations of girls and women?
- What did you know about the Mexican War before reading *Anna’s World*? What did you learn about the war from Thoreau’s lecture about it?
- In your own words, explain Thoreau’s argument that everyone in Boston is a murderer. Do you agree with him? Why or why not? How much responsibility do you feel for problems and crises in today’s world?



19. In real life, Henry David Thoreau actually did go to jail to protest the Mexican War. In this story, Anna's father disapproves of this sort of act, saying, "A law's a law." Do you think that breaking a law is ever justified? Explain your response.
20. After escaping from Seth, Anna chooses to return to live among the Shakers rather than with her father and stepmother in Boston. Why does she make this decision? What would you have done in her situation?
21. Examine and explain the motives of several characters in the story. For example, why do you think that Sally Crane, Brant Coburn, and Seth Edwards behave as they do?
22. In the epilogue, Anna is proud of Shaker men for their pacifism during the Civil War, and also of her father's efforts to help the Union win the war. Do her feelings seem contradictory to you? Why or why not?
23. How has Goshen changed by the time of the epilogue? Do you think that Shaker life has changed for the worse or the better? Explain your response.
24. The authors of *Anna's World* have said that the novel is similar to a science fiction story, even though it is historical fiction. What does *Anna's World* have in common with some science fiction stories you know of?
25. The authors of *Anna's World* have also suggested that the story is as much about the Shakers' conversion to Anna as it is about Anna's conversion to Shakerism. What do you think they mean by this?

TOPICS FOR RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

Topic #1: The Shakers

Research Shaker history and their communities that exist today. You might write about, illustrate, or give a performance about a particular aspect of Shaker life. You could start by downloading our "Author Notes" files from the ChironBooks website.

The historian Edward Deming Andrews wrote several books about the Shakers. The most comprehensive is *The People Called Shakers*, published in 1953. A more recent and up-to-date history is Stephen J. Stein's *The Shaker Experience in America*, published in 1992.

Andrews collected Shaker songs and rituals in *The Gift to be Simple*, published in 1940. A more recent and complete collection is *The Shaker Spiritual*, by Daniel L. Patterson, published in 2000. The audio CD *Simple Gifts: Shaker Chants and Spirituals*, directed by Joel Cohen, offers a wonderful opportunity to hear Shaker songs performed.

It is a common but mistaken assumption that the Shakers are extinct. A handful of active believers still live in Sabbathday Lake Shaker Community near New Gloucester, Maine. They can be heard performing on Joel Cohen's CD *Simple Gifts*. Their website address is

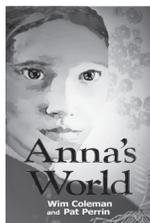
<http://www.shaker.lib.me.us/index.htm>

Search a library and the internet for more information on the Shakers.

Topic #2: Themes

Although the word *theme* is often defined as a message or moral, it is more properly thought of as an idea or broad topic. Discuss how some of the following themes from *Anna's World* are developed through the novel:

- the meaning of family
- social and economic justice
- war and pacifism
- abiding friendship
- varieties of religious belief
- technological progress
- slavery in America
- personal moral choice
- historical change
- sexual equality
- growing up
- personal liberty vs. rules and restrictions
- solitude vs. community



Topic #3: Imagery

Images are used throughout *Anna's World* to develop the novel's themes, plot, and characters. Discuss the following questions:

1. What do the stone slab near the Holy Fountain and its stern message tell about how the Shakers once were, and how they are changing? (Consider Eldress Clara's remark, "I think God was in very ill humor when he wrote all that stuff. And I rather doubt that he altogether meant it.") How does the slab's cold hardness contribute to its effectiveness as an image?
2. How does Anna feel about her Liberty half-dollar at the beginning of the story? How do her feelings change about it after hearing Thoreau's lecture at the Thimble Theatre? What does the half-dollar come to mean to her?
3. Review all the references in the novel the Jacob's ladder plant, its beautiful flower, and the medicine Greek valerian made from its roots. Describe the stages by which Anna learns about the plant and its medicine. How do the parts of the plant and the medicine made from it contribute to the novel's themes and plot, and also the development of Anna's character?
4. The Shaker village is described as filled with gardens, surrounded by a beautiful landscape, with houses built all of wood. Boston is a city made almost entirely of stone, especially granite. How do these contrasting images contribute to the novel's setting, story, and themes?

Topic #4: Character Development

Several characters in *Anna's World* change remarkably during the story. Even a minor character like Ruth changes from a serious, extremely religious girl to a grown woman who likes romantic songs and accuses Anna of being "pious and stuffy."

Describe in words, artwork, or performances how the following characters change during the story of *Anna's World*. Consider whether their changes simply happen to them, or whether they deliberately choose them. Do the changes in these characters mean that they grow as human beings? Which character goes through the most dramatic change, and why?

- Anna Coburn
- Sally Crane
- Brant Coburn
- Eldress Clara
- Henry David Thoreau

Topic #5: Historical Elements

Choose one of the following projects for a written or oral presentation:

1. Research two aspects of American life that were important during the time of *Anna's World*: slavery and the Mexican War. How were slavery and the war connected? How did the war and its outcome affect the future of the United States? How did slavery begin in America, and how was it finally brought to an end?
2. Read and report on one of the following works by real-life characters in *Anna's World*: "Civil Disobedience," by Henry David Thoreau; "Self-Reliance," by Ralph Waldo Emerson; "The Canterbury Pilgrims" or "Shaker Bridal," by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

