

The Wordy Shipmates Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Vowell gave the book this title? Why is she so fascinated by the Puritans, who are often seen as merely a bunch of “fanatical killjoys” in modern-day America? In what ways are the stereotypes about Puritans at least somewhat inaccurate?

2. Discuss the meaning of this quote from Nathaniel Hawthorne:

“Let us thank God for having given us such ancestors; and let each successive generation thank Him, not less fervently, for being one step further from them in the march of ages.”

3. What is Calvinism, and how did it affect the Puritans’ philosophy and behavior? Consider the story of the mother who drowned her baby and the connections that Vowell makes with the “Protestant work ethic.”

4. Discuss the significance of these quotes from the speech John Winthrop gave before the Massachusetts Bay colonists left England. Give examples of the application of these ideas in the book. How do they apply to political discourse in contemporary America?

“The only way to avoid this shipwreck [is to be] knit together in this work as one man.”

“We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.”

5. Discuss the metaphor of a city on a hill. How did Reagan use that metaphor? Discuss Vowell’s response to his use of it. What does she say we have lost as a nation that makes this a harmful self-image to have?

6. In what ways were the Puritans in a precarious position, and how did they manage their situation?

7. One of the major motifs of the book is the philosophical differences between Roger Williams and John Winthrop. Describe these differences. What broader threads in American culture did they represent?

8. Where did Williams stand on the issue of separation of church and state, and why? How was his position different from the position some of our Founding Fathers took?

9. On what issues was Roger Williams progressive and ahead of his time? (What opinions did he have that many Americans today would agree with?)

10. How was the behavior of the Puritans in America in some ways hypocritical? (Think about religious freedom.)

11. Discuss the significance and tone of the quotations below. How are they relevant to contemporary America?

“Check out those barbarian idiots with their cockamamie farce of a legal system, locking people up for fishy reasons and putting their criminals to death. Good thing Americans put an end to all that nonsense long ago.” (in reference to the Salem witch trials)

“The worldview behind that motto—*we’re here to help, whether you want our help or not*—is the Massachusetts Puritans’ most enduring bequest to the future United States.”

Additional important quotations for discussion in relation to the book as a whole:

“The only thing more dangerous than an idea is a belief. And by dangerous I don’t mean thought-provoking. I mean: might get people killed.”

“Winthrop will spend most of his time as magistrate tripping all over himself to make sure King Charles doesn’t get wind of any of the colony’s many treasonous infractions.”

“I’m always disappointed when I see the word ‘Puritan’ tossed around as shorthand for a bunch of generic, boring, stupid, judgmental killjoys. Because to me, they are very specific, fascinating, sometimes brilliant, judgmental killjoys who rarely agreed on anything except that Catholics are going to hell.”

“I wish I did not identify with their essential questions: What if my country is destroying itself? Could I leave? Should I?”

“Because of the ‘city upon a hill’ sound bite, ‘A Model of Christian Charity’ is one of the formative documents outlining the idea of America. But dig deep into its communitarian ethos and it reads more like an American that might have been, an America fervently devoted to the quaint goals of working together and getting along. Of course, this America does exist. It’s called Canada.”

“The ambition and toil Calvinism requires will lead the economist Max Weber to coin the term ‘Protestant work ethic’ to describe the Puritans’ legacy of rolled-up sleeves. Tireless labor and ambition in pursuit of salvation, he opined, led to a culture of tireless labor and ambition and a new religion—capitalism. No wonder a German historian dubbed John Calvin ‘the virtual founder of America.’”

“Such enlargement toward others, making others’ conditions their own, entertaining each other in brotherly affection - Williams’s description of the Narragansett way of life sounds a lot like Winthrop’s ideal of a city on a hill (just without Jehovah).”

“Protestantism’s evolution away from hierarchy and authority has enormous consequences for America and the world. On the one hand, the democratization of religion runs parallel to political democratization[...]. On the other hand, Protestantism’s shedding away of authority, as evidenced by my mother’s proclamation that I needn’t go to church or listen to a preacher to achieve salvation, inspires self-reliance—along with a dangerous disregard for expertise.”

George Washington, writing to a Jewish leader: “The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent national gifts. For happily the Government of the United States...gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance.”