

***The Runaway Wife***  
**By Elizabeth Birkelund**  
**Discussion Questions for Book Groups**

1. How would you describe Jim Olsen? What are the factors that have shaped his character?
2. When Jim first meets the three sisters, what is it about them that intrigues him? Why do you think he volunteers to help them?
3. At the Cabane des Audannes, Jim finds every corner of the place brimming with what, in his limited experience, he considers “a comforting and warm humanity.” Where and when in your life have you experienced this feeling?
4. Talk about the three sisters. How different are their perspectives on their mother and father? Siblings may have the same set of parents, but their experiences of their childhoods can be extremely different. Why do you think this is so?
5. Which sister do you gravitate to and why? Who do you think is the most effective in solving the problem of finding their mother? Whose view of their father is most sympathetic to you? What ties them together as a family?
6. Both Jim and Calliope are escaping from something. What are they escaping or leaving behind? Do you think getting away leads to good solutions? What has “time away” done for you in terms of making or rethinking decisions?
7. The novel points out the difference of “Aloneness” and “Loneliness.” How would you describe the difference? When Jim is alone in the Alps, what are his feelings? Exhilaration or fear, both or other? How do you feel when you are completely alone? Are you comfortable, anxious, relieved, impatient? What do you think of Calliope’s aloneness? Could you live the way she does for a summer, for a week, for a day?
8. Calliope seems to have set up an idyllic life in the Alps for herself. What is your idea of an idyllic life? Where are you? What are you spending your day doing? Who are you with?
9. Calliope seems to be living a version of her “ideal self.” Who is your Ideal Self? What qualities would you have?
10. Speaking to Jim about her marriage, Calliope asks, “Can love exist without trust?” What do you think?
11. What do you think of Jim and Calliope’s relationship? How does it start and how does it end? Who learns what from whom, if anything?
12. Jim and Calliope experience a whiteout during their difficult escape from the Alps. During a whiteout, visibility is severely reduced and the horizon disappears. In your life, have you lost your sense of direction to such a degree that you cannot see the horizon? If so, how did that feel, what did you do, and how did you find your way back? Whom did you rely on if anyone but yourself?
13. Calliope insists on visiting a female hermit. What did you think of this visit? What part of Calliope’s character is expressed in this chapter? What did Jim learn from this encounter?
14. During the return from the Alps, Jim must make a decision. Ideally, we make the decision that comes, not from other’s promptings, but from the part of ourselves

that we hold true. Do you think Jim's decision reflects this? Do you make decisions based on the part of yourself that you hold true?

15. Is there anything Jim could have done differently to change the outcome for Calliope in the end?
16. Does Calliope make a decision in the Alps that she cannot make back in Paris? In the end, does she stick to that decision? Why or why not? What does she fear?
17. Jim meets three sisters for the first time in the Alps, then Thalia, for a second time in Paris, and Helene, also for a second time in New York City. Is his perception different about them on the first and second meetings? What happens in the time we meet someone for the first and second times? Do you find you can "get" a person's character on first meeting?
18. Do you think Jim changes after his hiking vacation in the Alps? If so, how? Has anyone else changed during or after the journey? Ambrose? Calliope? The sisters? What is it that makes some people change after experiences and others stay roughly the same?
19. What is the role of the landscape of the Alps in the novel? How does it shape the characters and their lives? In what other books is landscape crucial to the characters and the plot?