Wormwood, by Susan Wittig Albert
China Bayles #17

Discussion Questions - Warning! Contains spoilers (plot hints).

1. What did you most like about this book? The characters? The setting? The plot?
2. The setting is a critical element in this mystery. Have you ever visited a Shaker village? If so, did the descriptions of Mount Zion ring true for you? What do you think are the most important parts of the setting?
3. The story of Mount Zion is told in two separate plots. One story consists of the mystery that's set in present time, where China Bayles is challenged to discover the identity of the person who's causing trouble for the village. See if you can summarize that plot, which begins in Chapter 3, with Martha's story about problems at the village. What happens first? Next? After that? How does this story end?
4. The second story of Mount Zion consists of a mystery set in the past. This story is told in alternating chapters (2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14, 16, 17, 18, and 20). It opens with an important conflict over property: a neighbor, Will Ayers, claims to own the spring and the area around Zion's Pool. What other conflicts do you find among the characters in this story?
5. The two plots are separate through most of the book, but come together near the end, when China resolves both through her "detective" work. Were you satisfied with these resolutions?
6. Throughout, the image of the Shaker village is that of the Garden of Eden. What are some of the ironies in this image?
7. Every China Bayles book has a "signature" herb. What do you think about the choice of wormwood as the signature herb for this book? Why do you think the author chose it? In this connection, what do you make of the headnote to Chapter Five?
8. There is a great deal of Shaker history and lore in this book, as well as entries from Shaker journals, advertisements from Shaker publications, and descriptions of herbs and potions from Shaker catalogs. What do these "extras" add to the story? What did you learn about Shakers that you didn't know?