

## *It Happened at the Fair*

Deeanne Gist

### Reading Group Guide

#### **Introduction**

Cullen McNamara wasn't supposed to be an inventor. He had long ago settled on a life of farming, but his debilitating allergies to cotton—and a tragic history with his mother—continued to steer him toward his idea for inventing an automatic fire sprinkler system. With the support of his father, Cullen attends the 1893 Chicago World's Fair and finds more than just a platform for his invention. A beautiful lip-reading teacher quickly turns his world upside down, and everything he thought he knew about himself—and life—changes.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1. In *It Happened at the Fair*, we are introduced to a hard-of-hearing farmer with severe allergic reactions to his crops. What are your first impressions of Cullen McNamara? Why do you think he was so resigned to a life of farming, even though it made him miserable?
2. Cullen's father manages to persuade Cullen to attend the fair after confessing he has paid the nonrefundable money for Cullen's travel expenses and fair fees. Despite Cullen's protests, do you think he was privately happy about this? Why or why not?
3. Describe Cullen and Wanda's relationship. How does he view his girlfriend? Why is he hesitant to set a date for their wedding?

4. Adelaide Wentworth, the beautiful lip-reading teacher at the fair, is hesitant to trust Cullen at first. Even when he proves his loyalty, she believes he is lying. What makes her so distrusting? How do you think that defined her character?
5. Della is forbidden from teaching sign language to her pupils because if they were to engage in it, they would be branded as different and therefore less than. How do you feel about that stigma? How has the stigma changed since the 1890s?
6. One of the overarching themes of the culture of America during the World's Fair appeared to be assimilation—if you weren't one of us, you were against us. Beyond the sign language stigma, in what other ways did this culture manifest?
7. Wanda accused Cullen of not being honest when he wrote the letter to break their engagement. She said he should have done it in person and that two more months wouldn't have mattered. Did Cullen do the right thing in writing Wanda to break off their engagement? Should he have waited and done it in person? Should he have written earlier? What else could he have done?
8. The backdrop of the World's Fair adds a certain ethereal magic to Cullen's and Della's relationship. How do you think things would have developed under different circumstances?
9. Cullen refuses to retaliate against or reprimand the manual sprinkler salesman, even though he feels very certain that Bulenberg had sabotaged his shed demonstration. How would you have reacted in Cullen's position? Why do you think he refused to address it?
10. Why do you think Cullen chose not to tell Della when he met her that he was engaged? Do you think he had feelings for her from the very beginning?
11. If someone had lied to you about having a fiancée, would you forgive him under the right circumstances?

12. Vaughn advised Cullen that he should not disclose his loss of hearing to potential clients since it had no bearing on the reliability of his sprinkler system. Yet Cullen felt this might be lying by omission, especially if he knew the client would object to working with someone with a disability. Who was right - Vaughn or Cullen? Why?
13. Discuss the author's note. Had you wondered if her descriptions were real? Is the Chicago World's Fair an event you wish you had been able to attend?
14. What were your favorite descriptions from the fair?