

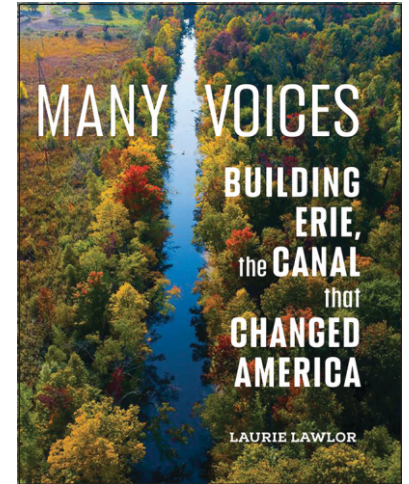
# Laurie Lawlor

author ✕ educator ✕ often found in nature

## Many Voices

### Building Erie, the Canal that Changed America a discussion guide

2025 marks the 200th anniversary of the completion of the Erie Canal, a 363-mile engineering marvel built across a daunting upstate New York landscape. In *Many Voices*, author Laurie Lawlor describes how the project was completed despite seemingly impossible odds, forever changing the United States. She also explores the fascinating ways the project mirrors many of the crucial political, social, technological, and cultural innovations and challenges of our own time.



### About the guide

This guide contains questions for book discussion groups made up of adult readers and/or young people ages ten and up.

### About the author



Laurie Lawlor is the award-winning author of numerous books for adults and young readers, including *Restoring Prairie, Woods, and Pond: How a Small Trail Can Make a Big Difference*; *This Tender Place: The Story of a Wetland Year*; and *What Music! The Fifty-year Friendship between Beethoven and Nannette Streicher, Who Built his Pianos*.

## Discussion questions

1. *Many Voices* is an in-depth exploration of what went into building the canal that *Booklist* describes as “a crucial, but often overlooked, phenomenon of American history.” What was the most surprising thing that you learned while reading the book?
2. The Erie Canal was completed despite numerous significant challenges. What do you believe were the most significant factors in overcoming these obstacles? In your discussion, weigh and measure motives such as: the attainment of wealth, the thirst for power, the desire to leave a legacy, a compulsion to solve scientific puzzles, the challenge of beating difficult odds, and the urgency to strengthen and expand a young nation. Do you think the building of the canal proves the old proverb that says, “Necessity is the mother of invention”?
3. In what ways did the building of the canal represent cutting-edge engineering? Can you think of other structures that were likely influenced by the building of the Erie Canal?
4. Author Laurie Lawlor describes how the canal had an impact that was similar to the creation of the Internet: both provided a “mighty ‘information highway’ that linked the nation.” Compare and contrast the impact of the building of the Erie Canal with the creation of the Internet.

### Discussion questions

5. Immigrants were a critical part of building the canal. What were their working conditions like? Why were these immigrants willing to do such difficult and dangerous work? Once the canal was built, it also continued to provide jobs for immigrants – who weren't always welcomed by local residents – and it helped fuel the movement of additional immigrants west to farms and to the building of booming midwestern cities. What parallels do you see in these experiences to other groups of immigrants to the United States?
6. What happens when a country is divided in some way? What changes are possible when something like the Erie Canal helps bring those people together? How and why are these innovations likely to introduce new problems?
7. Indigenous peoples such as the Haudenosaunee had been established for thousands of years in the area where the Erie Canal was built. What are some of the ways that their culture and lifestyle were different from the European descendants who planned and built the canal? What influence did Indigenous peoples have on the building of the canal? What impact, in turn, did the building of the canal have on these Indigenous peoples?
8. What role did women and children play in building the canal? How was the role of the area's Indigenous women different from women in the area who were European descendants? What impact did the finished canal have on women's rights and opportunities in the region and beyond?
9. Geology can be defined as the study of the Earth's structure. What role does geology play in determining how governments establish borders? What role did geology play in the need for and the building of the Erie Canal? What role has access to and control of water played in history? What big changes have come about when people have altered the flow of or access to water?
10. Talk about some of the ecological impact of the canal's construction. What needs to be considered when weighing the benefits that progress can bring against the toll that progress can take on the environment? (In the case of the Erie Canal, remember to include consideration of the impact that limited natural resources such as salt, lumber, soil, fresh water, and wild game had on the project.)
11. Although a significant advancement for its time, the Erie Canal as it was originally intended (as a major transportation network) is now defunct. What are the consequences when new technology makes the old outdated? What are some other examples of landmarks that once played a major role in a specific area but are now mostly (or entirely) lost to time? Like the Erie Canal's transformation into a "greenbelt" today, what are some creative ways that communities have re-purposed obsolete structures?
12. The introduction to the book compares the building of the Erie Canal to something "as impossible as building a canal to the moon." This line may make readers think of President Kennedy's famous pledge to send an American safely to the moon before the end of the 1960s. Can you think of similar pledges other famous leaders have made? Are there pledges such as this in place now? If you were in a position of great power, what one goal would you focus your attention on accomplishing in the next decade?
13. Imagine that you and your team have been assigned to come up with an innovative, future-thinking means of transporting goods and people across the globe. What ideas can you come up with? What challenges do you anticipate? What steps will you need to take to make it happen?