



ALL
the
LITTLE
HOPES
a novel

"Like all great Southern writers, Leah Weiss's magic turns the local into the universal."

—WILEY CASH, *New York Times* bestselling author
of *A Land More Kind Than Home* and *When Ghosts Come Home*

LEAH WEISS

The acclaimed author of *If the Creek Don't Rise*

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Lucy's mother points out that language is meant to communicate, not separate, which discourages Lucy from overusing her enormous vocabulary. Throughout the book, how do you see language used to communicate? To separate?
2. What do you think of Bert's desire to stay a girl instead of growing into a woman? How do we see Bert and Lucy accept growing up throughout the book? What are the chief differences you see between childhood and adulthood back in the 1940s as compared to today?
3. Describe the role of the Browns in their community. What are the broad effects of being a bibliophile?
4. Bert tends to blame herself when things go wrong—her mother dying, her father sending her away, Violet locking her out. Why do you think that is? Is it more of a female trait? Are there things you blame yourself for that really aren't your fault?
5. What do you think about the mystery of Trula Freed? Was her magic plausible? Have you ever had an experience with a spiritualist or medium?

6. Lucy and Bert argue about treating Nancy Drew like a real person. Can you think of any literary characters that you wish were real or who felt as real to you?
7. Though purple honey in North Carolina is rare but real, what role does it play in the book? Did it arrive just to cure the mysterious flu, or is it a symbol for something larger?
8. Whiz Mayhew comes home from the war with what we might now call PTSD, and his homecoming is difficult. In his drunken state he confesses that the Nazis didn't shoot him when given a chance because they *didn't think he was worth it*. What was he confessing in that statement? How did his community help him heal? Do we have better options today to help soldiers with PTSD?
9. Describe the relationship between the Riverton community and the German POWs. What effect does Terrell Stucky have on the reputation of the POWs? How do the Germans come to be an accepted part of the town?
10. When Bert was *almost compromised*, her greatest sorrow was that Frankie Tender never asked her name. Discuss the importance of that missing question and the consequence for Frankie Tender. If he had asked her name, would the evening have ended differently or not?
11. Helen refuses to interact with the Germans in any capacity. What do other characters think of her stubbornness? What does her stubbornness cost her? Do you think you would be as resistant in her place?

12. During her father's funeral, Bert realizes how much she's changed since she left home. Do you agree with her sister that she doesn't belong to the mountains anymore? How is "home" defined throughout the book?
13. None of the vanished men are particularly missed, and each presented a certain kind of danger to the community. How does Larry Crumbie's domestic abuse compare to Frankie Tender's callous seduction? To Terrell Stuckey's hate mongering and murder? Do you think these men deserved their fates?
14. Did Lucy, Bert, and Irene do the right thing when they found Tiny Junior's souvenirs? Would you have done the same?
15. What do you think comes next for Lucy and Bert and the rest of the Brown family? How do you think their experiences and decisions will affect their futures?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

Eastern North Carolina comes alive throughout the book. How do you give the landscape a voice?

I was born in the land where this book is set, and lived there until I was ten years old. Then we moved five hours north to Virginia to be with my daddy's people. In those early years, I was surrounded by Mama's sprawling family of fifteen siblings, my aunts and uncles who begat cousins. They were a kind and hard-working lot who stayed close to their roots. Only Mama moved away. I remember featherbeds, the outhouse, the ice box, the hand-cranked ice cream, and "putting in tobacco." Dinner was at noon, supper was at six, and everybody had well-tended gardens. Recreating the book's setting was as natural as breathing.

What inspired this book?

Before Mama died in 2005, I had begun "interviewing" her about her childhood years. My first published stories were about her memories. But, specifically, it was her comment about German POWs helping at tobacco markets in '44 that planted the seed for *All the Little Hopes*. I learned that between 1942 and 1946, forty-five states had POWs working farms, fertilizer plants, and in timber and canneries. Wikipedia estimates half a million prisoners were shipped to camps and governed by the humane laws of the '29

Geneva Convention. Seven hundred camps stretched across America. Eighteen camps were in North Carolina. One was in my birth town of Williamston.

Did you know much about apiarists before you started *All the Little Hopes*? How did you learn about beekeeping, honey, and wax production? Did you invent purple honey, or is it really possible?

My husband, Dave, began tending bees in 2017 and maintains three hives. I've absorbed some of his enthusiasm and research for bee knowledge and have come to understand the challenges. Then on a trip to Williamston, Rita Harden gifted me with three little-known facts from her childhood: Russian test pilots trained in Elizabeth City, her daddy's beeswax deal with the government, and purple honey that appeared one summer and was sold to bootleggers. I now know purple honey has been found only in central and eastern North Carolina, and is a genuine mystery. Two hives side-by-side can yield purple honey in one and amber in the other. I chose to make purple honey the medical salve for the Brown's gall-double-dang flu.

How did the mythical wolpertinger find its way into the book?

Research about Oma's birth place in the nineteenth century, her connection to German handmade marbles, and the Brothers Grimm and masterful storytelling from the Black Forest led me to an image of a wolpertinger. I was enchanted by its mythology, its appeal to tourists back then willing to pay to "hunt" them, and knew my storytelling Brown family would benefit from having one. Who could doubt Grimm's fairytales were true after they saw a "real" wolpertinger?

Both Bert and Lucy resist growing up in their own ways. Did you have any similar experiences as a teenager?

I don't remember being enamored of my childhood enough to want to stay there. In contrast to the 1940s of my mother's time, my transition from girl to woman happened in the sixties when the Women's Rights movement was making strides. Naïve, I looked forward to being a grown-up only to discover it was challenging, harder than I dreamed, and even boring. What I gained from my experiences over the ensuing decades is perfect 20/20 hindsight, and my writing benefits from those lessons learned.

Lucy would be best friends with Nancy Drew if she could. Are there any characters you wish you could bring into the real world and befriend?

I, too, loved Nancy Drew. I still have nineteen of my childhood Nancy Drew books (the blue book edition) and occasionally re-read them for nostalgia's sake. In my carefree summers in the late fifties, I spent days lost in Nancy's world. I'd sit in the shade of an oak tree and be so transported that I didn't hear Mama calling for supper. I yearned for the respect that Nancy garnered and the confident risks she took. I think all girls' dreams should hold those qualities.

You bring up interesting questions about redemption when it comes to the German POWs and the Real Bad Men. Is there a difference between redemption and forgiveness? Do you think it's always possible to make amends?

Redemption and forgiveness are gifts, aren't they? We can choose to give and receive salvation and mercy, but it takes wisdom to know they even exist. And for amends to be healing, it should never be a game of manipulation or win-lose. Bert learned that truth when she returned the things

she stole. Helen was slow to forgive, and she suffered more than she had to. And who would have thought that German POWs could live peacefully among us?

Reading and writing are often seen as lonely activities, but throughout the book they bring people together. How do books foster connections? Who's in your book community?

I write stories to be read out loud like the Brown family tradition, and I encourage readers to sharpen that skill. Then there's the energy and connection through book clubs. I have five wonderful girlfriends in my club (Sheila, Shannon, Sally, Dominique, and Glennys), and we meet once a month, drink wine, eat good food, and talk books. We don't always agree on what books are best, but disagreement makes for interesting discussions. We all agree that when we meet an unforgettable character in an unforgettable book, it brings pleasure of great magnitude.

Do you come from a family of bibliophiles?

I come from a family of readers and conversationalists. My dad was a thinker who read about religions, philosophy, and history. My mother loved books that transported like the Mitford Series, *Roots*, and *The Thorn Birds*. My parents believed reading expands understanding, dispels prejudices, and teaches empathy. Mama didn't trust people who didn't like to read.

Do books have a designated place in your home? What's in your reading stack these days?

I have overflowing bookcases and messy stacks of books here and there (not the alphabetized order like the Browns). I love historical fiction and relish Southern voices like Vicki Lane's *And the Crows Took Their Eyes*, the unique writing style of debut novelist Ashley Blooms's *Every Bone a Prayer*,

the 2020 Southern Book Prize winner *Magnetic Girl* by Jessica Handler, and everything by journalist/writer/Pulitzer Prize winner Rick Bragg. In my yet-to-read stack is *Sold on a Monday* by Kristina McMorris and *The Only Woman in the Room* by Marie Benedict. So many books, so little time...a wonderful quandary to have.

Do you see yourself in your characters? How do you get from the first idea of a character to the person who lives and breathes in the final draft?

I didn't publish *If the Creek Don't Rise* until I was seventy, and it was my age that gave me a broad scope of experiences to draw from. As a writer, I take the liberty to make characters wiser and smarter or more daring and tender than I'll ever be. *All the Little Hopes* is dear to my heart because I got to turn back the clock and immerse myself in Mama's world. I had two names for the main characters early on, but Lu and Bert are uniquely their own literary voices. I don't pretend to speak for my mama, Lucy, or her mama, Allie Bert, who were extraordinary women in different ways.

What has changed for you as a writer since the publication of *If the Creek Don't Rise*?

I coincidentally retired when my debut book was accepted by an agent, and I had abundant time to devote to a new career. My extrovert nature has made the journey a pleasure to meet the reading public and hear how strongly they react to characters spun out of words. But it is my equal love of solitary time that has made me a better writer. My greatest surprise is my patience to do the tedious work to complete a book and not to rush the process. My greatest joy is the self-imposed purpose that drives my free time.