



a novel

THE BOOK WOMAN *of* TROUBLESOME CREEK

**"An unputdownable work that holds
real cultural significance."**

—**SARA GRUEN**, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Water for Elephants*

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Reading Group Guide

A decorative flourish consisting of several elegant, swirling lines that frame the title and extend downwards.

1. The Kentucky Pack Horse program was implemented in 1935 by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to create women's work programs and to assist economic recovery and build literacy. Looking at the novel, how did the program affect the people in this remote area? Do you think library programs are still a vital part of our society today?
2. How has a librarian or booklover impacted your life? Have you ever connected with a book or author in a meaningful way? Explain.
3. Missionaries, government, social workers, and various religious groups have always visited eastern Kentucky to reform, modernize, and mold hillfolk to their acceptable standards. Do you think Cussy faced this kind of prejudice from the outside world? Is there any prejudice or stigma associated with the people of Appalachia today?
4. How do you think Cussy's father feels after he marries her off to an abusive man? Why do you think he agrees to Charlie Frazier's proposal in the first place? What do you imagine life was like for an unwed woman at that time?

5. Imagine you are making a community scrapbook like the ones Cussy distributes to the people of Troublesome. What would you include? Do you think these materials were helpful to Cussy's library patrons?
6. When Cussy receives the cure for her blueness from Doc, she realizes there's a price to pay for her white skin, and the side effects soon become too much to handle. If you were in Cussy's shoes, would you sacrifice your health for a chance at "normalcy"? If there weren't any side effects, do you think Cussy would have continued to take the medication? Would you?
7. How do you think Cussy feels when she is ostracized at the Independence Day celebration, despite her change of skin color? Can you relate to her feelings of isolation? Do you think these kinds of racial prejudices are still prevalent today?
8. Cussy has to deal with the loss of many loved ones in a very short amount of time. How do you think she handles her grief? Which loss was the most difficult for you to read?
9. What do you think life was like for the people of Troublesome? What are some of the highlights of living in such a remote place? What are some of the challenges the people on Cussy's library route face?
10. Back then, entering into a prohibited or interracial marriage in Kentucky was a misdemeanor that could result in incarceration, and we see these racial tensions attempt to sever Cussy and Jackson's relationship. Discuss anti-miscegenation laws and marriage laws. Do you think this kind of prejudice still exists toward interracial couples?

11. What do you think happens to Cussy, Jackson, Honey, and the other inhabitants of Troublesome after the story ends? Imagine you were Cussy. How would you feel leaving Troublesome for good?

A Conversation with the Author

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What drew you to the stories of the Pack Horse librarians and the blue-skinned people of Kentucky?

Years ago, I stumbled across these heroic librarians of the Great Depression and the rare blue-skinned Kentuckians, and I couldn't stop thinking about them. I wanted to embrace their strengths and uniqueness in story. There was such rich, magnificent history in the two, I was surprised I hadn't seen them in a novel, that neither had been given a footprint in literary history. I knew it was time for the wider world to experience them in a novel, to learn about, to see, the glorious Kentucky female Pack Horse librarians and the precious blue-skinned mountain folk.

Your novel is deeply rooted in the history of Appalachia. What research did you do to bring this time period to life?

Research is my favorite part of the writing process. I spent thousands of hours exploring everything from fauna to flora to folklore to food, as well as longtime traditions indigenous to Appalachia. I'm also able to live in that landscape and spend time with native Appalachians who have taught me the lyrics and language of their people and ancestors. Other research took me to coal-mining towns and their history, visiting doctors, speaking with a hematologist to learn about congenital methemoglobinemia, and exploring fire tower lookouts and their history. Years ago, I started collecting everything I could find on the Pack

Horse librarians, poring over archives, old newspapers, pictures, the history, etc. I spent many hours on Roosevelt's New Deal and WPA programs and conducted interviews. And last, there was the fun and interesting research on mules.

What does your writing process look like?

I've long been a kitchen table author, one who sets aside the recipe, forsakes the rules—the do's and don'ts, the shant's, shouldn'ts, and won'ts. This doesn't mean I don't respect the rules—it simply allows me the unleashed freedom to create the story intimately and lyrically, as if I'm sitting at my kitchen table across from you and telling it. There's the occasional detour, of course, and sometimes I take out the guardrails going one hundred miles per hour. And there's piles of research papers, the countless scraps and sticky notes littered everywhere in my office, on my desk and shelves. My dear husband usually creates cool, detailed drawings of my fictional towns to anchor and keep me straight. At all times, there's my beloved rescue pets wandering in and out of my office. Music is a must-have, and I try to create a playlist to reflect the moods and themes in my stories. My music influence is broad, passionate, and can dip into everything from opera to bluegrass to rock, and on to classical, big band, jazz, rap, country, and indie. During edits, all is quiet, and I'm slow, turtle slow, and also painfully meticulous, and can absolutely sit on a single paragraph for days, working and fretting over it. I generally devote anywhere from eight to fourteen hours a day to writing, research, and book-related stuff.

Did your own experiences living in Kentucky inspire or influence any of the descriptions in the book?

Yes, Kentucky is both a beautiful and brutal place full of fascinating history, varied landscapes, complex people and culture, and I'm fortunate to live in a region that I can draw on from the heart.

Do you see any similarities between yourself and Cussy? Differences?

I grew up under the grinding heels of poverty, spending my first decade in a rural Kentucky orphanage, moving on to foster care, and then finding myself homeless at age fourteen. I can relate to marginalized people and have much empathy for Cussy and her family, anyone who has faced or faces prejudices and hardships. It's easy to feel their pain deeply, particularly if you've gone through hardships in your own life.

If you had to choose, what is one of your favorite moments from the novel?

One of my dearest is when young Angeline takes Cussy Mary's hand, despite knowing the implication of being friendly with a blue, and rings a simple truth by saying "Hain't no harm. Our hands don't care they's different colors. Feels nice jus' the same, huh?"

Throughout the novel, we see the positive effects the Pack Horse library service has on this small, remote community. Do you think libraries still have that kind of impact today?

Absolutely, and now more than ever. As I mentioned earlier, I was raised in an orphanage. Later, as a foster child in 1970, I remember going to my first library one lonely summer and checking out a book. The librarian sized me up and then quietly said, "Only one? You look smarter than a one-book read, and I bet we can find you more than just *one*." She reached under her counter, snapped open a folded brown-paper sack, handed it to me, and then marched me over to shelves filled with glorious books. I was shocked that I could get more than one book, much less a bag full of precious books, and I was moved by her compassion, kindness, and wisdom. Librarians are lifelines for so many, giving us powerful resources to help us become empowered.

What are some of your favorite libraries to visit?

I love hitting the backroads to seek out small-town libraries. These places are treasured cornerstones filled with social mores—hidden gems that offer an opulence of customs, inspiration, and warm hospitality.

Who are some of your favorite authors to read?

There are so many talented writers out there to pick from, it makes the choice difficult. However, one influence and much-loved author of mine has always been E. B. White. *Charlotte's Web* is a jewel that tapped into my love for nature and animals. And every time I read it, I learned something new. It has that wonderful Hitchcockian first line—"Where's Papa going with that ax?"—and is infused with magical verses of dewy spiderwebs, "Some Pig" miracles, and unconditional friendship. *Some Book—Some Author!* Harriette Simpson Arnow, John Fox Jr., Gwyn Hyman Rubio, and Walter Tevis are some of my longtime favorite Kentucky novelists who wrote unforgettable masterpieces. Each one brings the pages to life with rich, evocative landscapes, beautifully told stories, and highly skilled prose.

What do you hope readers will ultimately take away from Cussy's story?

Poverty and marginalization are not so much economics or politics or societal issues as much as they are human issues. They are best grappled with by reaching deep into the lives of those suffering them. Knowing one small piece of this world—the earth, the sky, the plants, the people, and the very air of it—helps us to understand the sufferings and joys of others ourselves.