

A young woman with long brown hair is sitting on the ground, leaning against the rusted green door of an old car. She is looking off to the side, and her hair is blowing in the wind. The car door is open, and the interior is visible. The background is filled with green foliage and trees.

“An impressive debut from a talent to watch.”

— KATHLEEN GRISSOM, author of
New York Times bestsellers
The Kitchen House and *Glory Over Everything*

if the creek don't rise

a novel

LEAH WEISS

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Life in 1970 Appalachia (and fictional Baines Creek) was undeniably hard and harsh. What did the novel tell you about that historic time and place that you expected? What did you learn that surprised you?
2. Sadie Blue was the principal character in the book, with her story told in three chapters. Did you root for her from the start? What were her key moments of growth? Who were her mentors and supporters? What did they do that helped her grow a stronger backbone?
3. In what ways were Sadie Blue and her grandmother, Gladys Hicks, and Sadie and her mother, Carly, alike? In what ways were they different?
4. Gladys and Marris were best friends. Who needed the other the most? Who gave the greatest purpose to their relationship?
5. Did you think Gladys was oblivious to her mean behavior? Why did she feel entitled to that mean behavior? How do you think she would have described herself?
6. Who were the most lovable or admirable characters? What made them that way? What were their strengths and weaknesses? In what ways were they important to Sadie's salvation?

7. Preacher Eli Perkins never quite believed he was good enough for his job. How did that quality make you feel about him? How do you think he performed his job?
8. Three characters that are hard to love are Prudence Perkins, Roy Tupkin, and Billy Barnhill. Did you find any reasons to empathize with them? What were the pivotal moments in their past that shaped their personalities? How do you think you would have fared if you were born into their families and stations of life?
9. When Kate Shaw arrived in Baines Creek, she expected to be doing the teaching. What were the things she learned instead?
10. Birdie's Books of Truths: What insights did they give you into life in Appalachia and the gifts Birdie possessed?
11. What role did Tattler Swann play in the book? Was he a good spokesman for Jerome Biddle? If so, why?
12. This book is written in first person, present tense. Did that choice by the author make the story more intimate? If so, in what ways?
13. Which characters were most capable of loving? In what ways did they demonstrate that?
14. A number of murders were committed in the book. Do you think any of them were justified? If so, which ones and why?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

I've always loved pretty words and sentiments, and I got much pleasure writing letters to friends getting married, struggling through a hard time, or celebrating a landmark. Some of those letters were framed by the recipients, so I knew I had a penchant for heartfelt prose that mattered to people. I was well into my fifties when a friend encouraged me to write a book of short stories, and my initial response was *Does the world really need another book?* But his encouragement and support planted a seed that grew roots. The first stories I wrote were about my mom, Lucy, and her life on a tobacco farm in the 1930s. She was one of fifteen children living in an unpainted house without running water or electricity. She and I found a special bond talking about her childhood, which she thought no one cared to remember. I didn't know that in a few months Lucy would die of cancer and I would be left with grief and amazing fodder from those conversations. When the stories tugged at me to do more, I knew I wanted to write them.

Who are your favorite authors and why?

I am a picky reader. I look for a great story written exceptionally well, with the prose highly polished and the deadweight

removed from the story line. Because I have a particular love for the southern voice, some of my top choices are obvious: Harper Lee, Rick Bragg, Barbara Kingsolver, Robert Morgan, and Ron Rash rush to the head of the line. Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides* was as compelling a read as I've ever had. Even today the images of those sincere, flawed characters Mr. Conroy put to paper burn bright. A more recent book that was a marvelous surprise on all fronts (except it isn't southern) was *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak. Who would have guessed that Death as the narrator could be so sympathetic and compassionate? Or that a book's format could be so original?

Where did your idea for the book come from, and why is it set in Appalachia?

The inception of this book began in 2011 with a writing contest that had a cap of 1,500 words and an opening prompt of *I struggle to my feet*. From the moment the prompt fell on my page, Sadie appeared in my mind as a complete person and personality, from her slight form and pale skin, to her mountain voice and her birth in Appalachia. Why? That's a mystery I can't explain. Maybe the Appalachia I heard about in my youth resonated in the pain painted in the opening five words. My initial task was to tell Sadie's story in only a few pages. I often wondered what the rest of the story was. Now I know.

Do you have a favorite character? If so, who and why?

Let me preface the answer with the fact that a favorite character for this writer isn't necessarily the lovable one with the kind heart, good teeth, and best intentions. Good characters

ground a story and give us someone to worry about and cheer for. The reader in me never likes a book that doesn't have characters I care about. In this book, Marris Jones is about as good a soul as you'll ever find. But the ugly, blackhearted characters, those who manipulate and claw through life, are the most compelling to me as a writer. Prudence and Roy take the cake in that category. Two more self-serving and cruel people I'll be hard-pressed to write about. When I found the courage to walk into the mind-set of these characters (yes, they scared me), their stories floated to the surface like greasy oil, and so did their vulnerabilities. That was the surprise—to discover pivotal moments in their development that formed their life's dismal path and to ask the question: What would I have grown to be if faced with those obstacles?

You talk as if these characters are real, but they're not, are they?

A good writer strives to make her characters complex and flawed and susceptible to all human foibles, and that's what makes them real. But no, this book, the characters, and their settlement are a work of fiction pulled from someplace deep in my psyche and the soup of my life's experiences. Only Preacher Eli Perkins resembles someone I knew, and that was my favorite uncle, who was a Baptist preacher. He could fire off jokes, one after the other, rivaling stand-up comics. He was my inspiration for Eli, but everyone and everything else is fabricated.

What is the most fun part of the writing process?

When the book is 90 percent complete, all the major pieces

are in place, each character has a distinct voice, and the narrative arc is clear—then the fun begins. I call this part of the process “polishing the silver.” It is slow going but satisfying to fill in missing pieces and ponder every word to see what stays or goes for the sake of the story. I look for anything that bogs down the story line. Anything that doesn’t make sense to the character’s behavior or reaction. Then I wander deeper into their background and always discover something new and pertinent I didn’t know about them the day before. While it sounds odd, the characters do take on a life of their own—and I miss spending time with them when the story ends.

What is the most challenging part of writing?

For me, it was developing an accurate timeline for the story. I thought I had created one, but it was not tight enough when dealing with ten major characters. Some of my last cleanup efforts were spent fixing it. Until a timeline is clearly established, it is easy to have things happening before they should to people they shouldn’t. This part of the process takes patience, research, and copious notes about the time period and the events, large and small, in the lives of each character.

What is the one thing you know now that you wish you had known at the start of your writing career?

I wish I’d known I had to start at the beginning as a writer. Wishful thinking and my love for pretty words didn’t give me a shortcut to success. For a while, my ego held me back because I wanted to believe that what fell naturally on the page was good enough. It was when I took down that defensive wall and

committed myself to learning this craft from the ground up that progress was made. I could have saved myself a lot of heartache if I'd just enrolled in Writing Kindergarten 101 and started, *In the beginning*—which is the place all good stories start, right?

What advice would you give aspiring writers?

Take to heart the confession above, and believe the world always has room for another good book.