

"A tale of the kind of grace that can only be found in your hometown."

—Caroline Angell, author of *All the Time in the World*

The Lost Queen of Crocker County

a
novel

ELIZABETH LEIKNES

READING GROUP GUIDE



1. How accurately do you feel the two settings in this novel (Los Angeles and the rural Midwest) were portrayed? Have you been to either location? Which place do you most identify with: the West Coast or the Midwest?
2. Would you live in Jane's hometown? What did you like about it? What did you dislike?
3. Jane's shameful secret from her past prevents her from returning home and therefore keeps her from her family. How realistic is the concept that shame could shape someone's life to that extent? Is guilt something that is an especially midwestern trait or more of a universal one?
4. Jane is both physically and emotionally marked by her home. To what degree does where you grew up make you who you are? How have you been shaped by your own home?

5. How many movies referenced in this novel did you recognize? Did it make you want to see any of them for the first time or revisit some of the classic favorites? What are your favorite movies and why? Jane often associates particular films with people she knows. Do you ever think of friends or family members by such an association?
6. Jane is the most memorable Corn Queen in Crocker County. In your hometown, were there any legendary characters? What role did you play?
7. Charlotte Davis puts her utter desperation on display with her meatloaf hotline. What is the most humiliating job you've ever had?
8. When Jane sees her mother's corn casseroles stacked up like "little corpses" in the deep freezer, waiting for when her only daughter might make a visit, it is a defining moment for her. What defining moments have brought you to a crossroads in your life? What did you do?
9. Jane has many flaws as a character. What do you think were her greatest sins? Her most redeeming acts? Do you have empathy for the way she handles her struggles, or were you disturbed by the choices she made to try to reconcile them?
10. The notion of second chances is paramount in this novel. Do you believe in second chances, or are they the stuff of movies and Hollywood endings?

11. How does Jane change or evolve throughout this story? What can be learned from her journey?
12. What was your favorite or most memorable passage in the book? Why did it make an impression?
13. At the end of the book, who do you envision at the door? What does the future hold for Jane, Rob, and Bliss? What future do you think Jane deserves?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR



Why did you make Jane a movie critic?

Okay, this is funny. (And when I say “funny,” I mean “tragically embarrassing as a writer.”) Originally, Jane was a food critic. I spent a *long* time scouring fancy cookbooks, watching ridiculous amounts of every cooking show imaginable, and when my keen-eyed but brutally honest husband read the first chapter of my original story, he said, “Babe, this food stuff is forced. You’re not a foodie. You own five Crock-Pots. You love movies. Write about movies.” And voilà, Jane was a movie critic. Jane’s original idol was Ruth Reichl, food critic extraordinaire, who was then replaced by Pauline Kael, film critic extraordinaire. The scene when Jane gets advice from the spirit of Pauline Kael always reminded me of that scene when Clarence gets mentored by the spirit of Elvis in Quentin Tarantino’s *True Romance*. But I digress. Regarding the food research, I now know weird things about foie gras, balut, and various bisque soups. Ultimately, my husband is right; I’m not a foodie. My friends out here in the west think my penchant for

Midwest casseroles and my various Pinterest Crock-Pot boards are pretty funny. Don't get me started on how little ketchup they eat out here. It's all salsa, all the time. Whatever.

How much of your own Midwest experience/real-life experience is present in this novel?

There's always a hint of the writer in every book, but in this particular book, there's a lot. Since this book is essentially a love letter to Iowa, my imaginary world was based on my childhood, and so much of it was unearthed from the recesses of my memory while writing. The two grain silos named after Jane's parents were, in fact, based on two grain silos in Albert City, Iowa. In the 1970s, they were the two biggest silos in the country, and for some reason unknown to me, they were named Big Bertha and Fat Albert, and the naming of grain silos seemed as normal to my Iowan natives as it might for people who name boats, I guess.

The fictional town of True City was a combination of the little town I grew up in (Truesdale, Iowa, population 72!) and the town where I went to school (Albert City, Iowa, population 800).

My mom loves musicals and made us watch *The Sound of Music* every year; my dad, like Jane's, has a flair for precise language and would remind us that "only meat can be done, tasks are finished" on a weekly basis. He also was the manager of our grain elevator (maybe that's why I have a soft spot for grain silos), and on the weekends, my mother, my six siblings, and I played in my father's band, Maynard and the Moonlighters, where I got to mingle with many of the types of people that I based Mr. Stephens on—the kinds of people who, at the end of the day, did the right thing and said nothing of it.

Where did the inspiration for this story come from?

A few years ago, on my way home from school (I teach middle school English), I heard a slight thump while driving. In retrospect, it was probably something inconsequential like a rock on the highway or maybe even just the way the car reacted to a bump in the road, but at the time, my initial reaction was a series of emotions alternating between panic and denial. Did I hit something? You're just tired; it was nothing. Oh my God, what if it was a kitten? Why would a kitten be on the highway? I even pulled the car over to peruse the area and make sure I didn't see anything. Then, as I resumed my drive home, I was struck with this: Is it normal to have those kinds of thoughts (zero to prison) in reaction to a small incident like that? Do other people see headlines in their heads—LOCAL TEACHER CHARGED WITH HIT-AND-RUN INVOLVING SMALL ANIMAL IN FRONT OF DAIRY QUEEN—or is this, perhaps, strictly a midwesterner's reaction? Does where we come from shape who we are? Are midwesterners somehow programmed for guilt? By the time I got home, a story had formed about a woman, transplanted in the west, who returns to her Midwest home to face her sins and after being involved in a hit-and-run accident has to make things right.

When do you find time to write?

As a mother of two children, along with a full-time teaching job, I have to get very creative to find time to write. I wrote my first two books on maternity leave—babies sleep a lot—and for a while I was a little terrified that I wouldn't be able to write a book without gestating, like those two acts of creation couldn't be separated. But since our family was beautifully complete with our two boys, I

decided I'd have to figure it out. So I accepted that I'd never have the luxury of uninterrupted hours of time like you see in the movies—pontificating writers, well-groomed, wearing smart scarves and sitting at grown-up-looking desks. As my boys grew older and busier with school functions and sports events, I began writing on receipts, napkins, or random scraps of paper at the bottom of my purse. (I've kept a fair amount of these to remind me of this period in my life when novels were written in between soccer games and trips to the grocery store.) The idea for my next book came while listening to a fascinating news story on the radio, and I jotted down a title and the first line of the book on the back of a Target receipt. And for me, most of the real act of writing, the important stuff, doesn't happen at the computer. I have to work it all out in my head before I start typing. It's actually very exciting yet unsettling, the first stages of a book coming to life. There are all these little pieces you know are important, but they just don't seem to go together. I'm not satisfied until I figure out the puzzle. At night, as I'm falling asleep (nobody is asking me to check homework or make them a sandwich at this hour), I rearrange ideas, figure out how it's all connected, and then, in the morning, sometimes, if I'm really, really lucky, some of the pieces (and oftentimes actual lines) have been sorted. So, I guess my writing office is often in my car as I take advantage of stolen moments at stoplights or as I'm falling asleep. (Not sleeping in my car. In an actual bed.) And truthfully, my husband helps me carve out time to write by being the best dad in the world. This is a luxury I am grateful for every single day.

Did you do any research for this particular novel?

I researched the medical aspects of being in a coma and also

various film critics, but the most interesting research I did was on teens who hide their pregnancies. I wanted to make sure that Janie hiding a pregnancy was plausible, and sadly, not only is it, but it is more common than you might think. I knew Janie was going to give birth on her own, and when researching the plausibility of this, I stumbled upon a news story about a teenage girl in the 1980s who hid her pregnancy, gave birth in her bedroom, and, knowing she couldn't care for this child, left her in a Burger King bathroom to safely be found. Ironically, the baby was adopted and grew up just miles away from the birth mother without her knowing it. Years later, when the now-grown baby, who had children of her own, wanted to meet her birth mother, they had a lovely reunion on television. It really solidified my feelings about the possibility of second chances, even in motherhood. Especially in motherhood.

Did you set out to make us laugh or cry?

Oh, both! It is really important to me as a writer—and as a reader, actually—that a story is both funny but also very tender at moments. I tend to read things that have a balance between these two. In my own stories, I strive for 70 percent funny, 30 percent gut-wrenchingly sad. (The English major in me just glanced at that again to make sure the math added up.) But the third emotion I am always interested in is shame.

I'm really intrigued by shame. Who doesn't have personal experience with shame? It's different from embarrassment. It's when embarrassment and guilt collide. This is the stuff of a midwesterner's nightmares. *I did something super dumb and it's my fault. Ugh.* I really do lean into those awkward moments on the page, draw

them out to spotlight those times that remind me of when I've said something ridiculous or horrible and the whole room has stopped to observe the train wreck.

Do you have an ideal reader in mind when you're writing?

Well, the smart, writerly answer is no. Of course not. Writing with others' opinions in mind taints the authenticity of what you're trying to say. But that's for the cool kids—those writers I imagine who never second-guess their work. I find myself second-guessing quite a bit, especially in later drafts, after the glow of “I think this might be good” has worn off. I don't know if I have an ideal reader in mind, but I definitely have voices that pop up. My husband tends to secretly want everything I write to sound like a hard-boiled Raymond Chandler novel. I happen to know this. So I often think of that when my narration gets a bit too chatty and I need to stick to action and dialogue. Often, though, I think of what authors I admire would say. Would Maria Semple laugh at *any* of this? Would Lorrie Moore be bored with how literal this sentence is? Celeste Ng would never overwrite like I just did. That type of stuff. It's maddening.

When did you know you wanted to be a writer?

The first story I can remember writing was a one-page story that I wrote during my brother David's wrestling meet. I think I was six or seven. It was about a pumpkin who was sad because nobody chose him from the pumpkin patch. When my mother read it, she made me feel like I was the only little girl who could pull off such a feat, writing a story. Her praise deemed me a writer and, therefore, I think, deep down, I defined myself as such. When I became a

teacher, I never forgot that—how to tread lightly when someone shows you their heart and soul on the page, and to be very loud when telling someone they have talent. Later, at the University of Iowa, I fell in love with the short story, and a profound moment for me was buying my first Lorrie Moore book at Prairie Lights in Iowa City. From the first sentence, I knew that, for me, this is what a writer sounded like. And that's what I wanted to be.