

"Nothing short of astonishing." —**Mateo Askaripour**,
New York Times bestselling author of *Black Buck*



One Summer in Savannah

A Novel

Terah Shelton Harris

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Poetry plays an important role throughout the book. Why do you think Sara's father only speaks in poetry? Do you think poetry has the ability to communicate more than simple words can?
2. Throughout the book, Jacob struggles to forgive his brother. Some say family should always be forgiven, no matter the transgression. Do you believe there are some things that cannot or should not be forgiven?
3. Do you believe you can still truly love someone even if you can't forgive them for their past actions?
4. Do you think Daniel deserved to know of Alana's existence? Did Sara have an obligation to tell him he had a daughter?
5. In the United States, no federal law explicitly restricts the parental rights of men who father a child through rape,

meaning, depending on the individual state's law, the man or his family could petition for visitation or even custody of the child. Do you think this is fair or just?

6. Why do you think Birdie cannot or will not accept what Daniel did, even after he explicitly admits to her that he raped Sara?
7. Do you agree with Jacob's decision to reveal Sara's secret to Daniel despite his having promised her he wouldn't?
8. The love of a mother for her child is often described as an impossible love. In what ways does this play out for Sara? For Birdie?
9. Homemade Pizza Fridays are an important tradition for Sara's family. What was your favorite family tradition as a child? Did that tradition carry through to the present?
10. In a conversation between Jacob and Daniel, Jacob asks if Daniel thinks love is worth walking away from family for if they're unaccepting of the relationship. Do you think it is?
11. On one Pizza Friday, Sylvia poses a question: "Would you rather be able to reverse one decision you make every day or be able to stop time for ten seconds every day?" What would your answer be?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What inspired you to write *One Summer in Savannah*?

Inspiration for *One Summer in Savannah* stems from the 2015 Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church shooting. Days after that terrible tragedy, some of the survivors and relatives of those killed walked into a South Carolina courtroom and forgave the shooter. At that moment, I realized I knew nothing about forgiveness. I assumed that there were crimes, acts, that were unforgivable. But when they forgave him, they challenged me to look inward and create my own definition of forgiveness, and I knew then that I wanted to explore that by writing a book that challenged readers on what they believe is or is not forgivable.

One Summer in Savannah is also inspired by the #MeToo movement and all of the brave women who have stepped forward after years, decades, and who spoke their truth and shared their stories with the world.

**How did you come up with the characters Sara and Jacob?
Did the characters come first? Or the plot?**

The plot, always. I know what my story is about, the overall theme, and how it ends before I write one word. Once I have the plot, the characters start to come alive. *One Summer in Savannah* has always been Sara's story to tell, but as I began to write, I realized that I was missing an entire side of the story. That's where Jacob comes in. Jacob's perspective allows the reader to see and understand the complete picture.

Where did the idea for Hosea only speaking in poems come from? How did you go about finding the perfect poem every time to serve as Hosea's dialogue?

I love poetry, and I knew that I wanted to somehow incorporate it into this book. From the beginning, I wanted Hosea to communicate to the world differently. Hosea's character is loosely based on my grandfather, who suffered a stroke and lost his ability to speak. But that didn't stop him from finding a way to communicate with us and for us to learn how to understand him. In Hosea's case, why not use poetry as his way of communicating?

Originally, I had most of his dialogue as poems, but as I began to write, the poems took over entirely. I thought my early readers would have a problem with it or difficulties understanding him, but they didn't. In fact, they loved it! All the poems in Hosea's dialogue are in the public domain, so that played a huge part in the selection. But like Hosea, I'm a fan of Whitman, Yates, Angelou, Cummings, and Dunbar.

Why did you decide to place this story in Savannah? What do you love about Savannah?

The decision to place *One Summer in Savannah* in Savannah came from Jacob's cottage, based on a real cottage I saw for sale on Hird Island. I knew immediately that's where Jacob would live, and because of that, I based the entire story in Savannah.

I could live in Forsyth Park! I also love the antebellum architecture and cobblestone streets.

What do you think is next for Sara, Jacob, and Alana?

I wrote a somewhat happy epilogue (a letter Alana wrote to Birdie) but decided not to include it. I'm drawn to (and write) stories with bittersweet endings and didn't want to wrap *One Summer in Savannah* up in a cute bow. It just would not have been fair to the topic. As Sara says, life is hard and so will their life be moving forward. Unfortunately, their happy ending is not immediate. Yes, Sara and Jacob decided to be together, but they still face obstacles. First, they will mourn the deaths of Hosea and Daniel. Next, they will have to find a way to incorporate Birdie into their lives after so many years of strife between them while balancing how to handle Alana's genius.

Years later, they will find their footing and that eventual place of contentment. I envision Sara and Jacob having their own child, another girl, another genius. This time, pregnancy will be much more fulfilling for Sara. I also see Jacob finally

embracing his desire to teach, but two of his students will be Alana and his daughter. As for Alana, she will solve the equation by the time she's sixteen. Solving it leads to the definition of time, a subject that has always captivated her. Fame doesn't change her because Sara and Jacob have allowed her to be a normal girl. Oh...and she still loves to swim!

What was your path to becoming a writer?

I knew early on that I wanted to be a writer. When I was younger, I had always written poems and stories, but my love for writing materialized in Julie Cook's sixth-grade class. Back then, we had a period called DEAR, Drop Everything and Read. But Mrs. Cook also allowed us to write. So, I did and wrote my first book, *The Class Party*. I wrote for my college newspaper and spent decades as a freelance writer. But it wasn't until a few years ago that I decided to try my hand at writing novels.

What is your writing process like?

I need absolute quiet so I can focus and turn inward. I spend a lot of time in my head, so I need to work without distractions—my characters demand it. Before I begin a new book, I need to know how it ends. Once I have that worked out, I write the beginning and go from there. I don't write linearly. I write whatever scene comes to me that day, then I put all the scenes together.

I handwrite most of my books. I can't explain it, but the

words flow better that way. I have stacks of notebooks, but I prefer to write on scrap pieces of paper with a dully sharpened pencil. I work full-time, so I try to handwrite about five hundred words a day during the week and a few thousand on the weekends. I write in my car on my lunch breaks or at stoplights.

What are some of the books that have influenced or inspired your own writing?

I consider *As I Lay Dying* by William Faulkner a literary masterpiece, and its influence is the basis for my next book, a family drama centered on the death of the patriarch. *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng is the perfect execution of third-person omniscient present and the blending of multiple POVs and also serves as inspiration for my next book.

I've been obsessed with reading my entire life, and when I'm not writing, I read approximately a hundred books per year. I enjoy reading widely across all genres and can honestly say I find inspiration in almost everything I read. Whether it's a character trait or word choice or sentence structure. Working as a librarian in charge of collection development, I'm responsible for selecting and purchasing all the adult material for my libraries. This job (which I absolutely LOVE!) keeps me apprised of new books and allows me access to them.