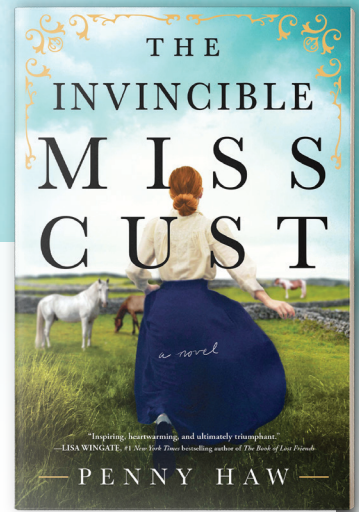


THE INVINCIBLE MISS CUST

BY PENNY HAW

READING GROUP GUIDE

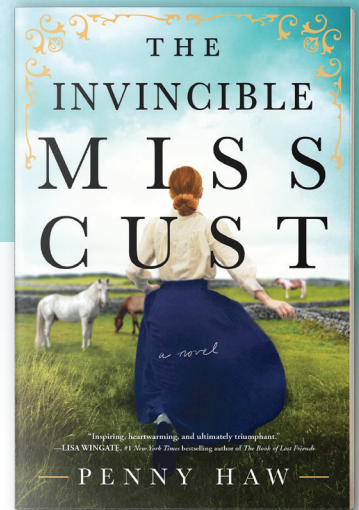


1. How did the time Aleen spent at Newton Hall in the company of Lady and Major Widdrington and Dorothy influence the woman she would grow up to become?
2. Aleen's landlady in Edinburgh, Mrs. Logan, at one point says, "It is possible to outgrow family, you know." Do you agree or disagree with this statement?
3. One of the reasons the RCVS gave for wanting to prohibit women from becoming veterinarian surgeons was that they lacked the physical strength to do the job, the same excuse used by the U.S. military to prevent women from enlisting in certain areas. Do you think this is a valid reason women should be excluded from some professional endeavors?
4. Even though Aleen's family tried with all their might to keep Aleen from pursuing her dreams and didn't support her at all, she was still concerned with drawing attention to her case and further humiliating her family. To the very end, she still hoped for reconciliation with them. If you were in her position, what would you have done?
5. Aleen scored the highest marks of her class at New Veterinary College. But rather than that accomplishment being a cause for celebration, her classmate and the principal recommended adjusting her scores so as not to call attention to her proficiency from the RCVS. Do you agree with the decision to do so? Do you think it was necessary? Do you think the outcome would have been any different had she submitted her actual scores?
6. Aleen had many advocates along the way who supported and encouraged her to pursue her dream despite the obstacles set before her—Professor Williams and the New Veterinary College, Mr. Andrew Spreull, the Widdringtons, and Willie Byrne. Do you think she would have accomplished her goal of becoming a veterinarian surgeon without their backing?
7. Even today, when children are asked what they want to be when they grow up, one of the most cited careers is veterinarian. Has that ever been a dream job for you? What did you want to be when you grew up, and how did your answer then differ from what you do today?
8. Discuss how Aleen was able to win over and earn the respect of her peers and clients. How would this have been different had she been a man?
9. Aleen and Willie kept their relationship a secret, mostly because of their differences in religion, nationalities, and the social statuses of their upbringing. Do you still see people facing these kinds of barriers today?
10. Dorothy Widdrington expressed to Aleen that she was not sure she wanted to marry, that she wanted to do something else with her life. Ultimately, she did marry though. Why do you think she decided to do so? Do you think it was a personal choice? Pressure from her family or from society? Or some other reason?
11. Bertie offered to marry Aleen when he discovered she was pregnant with Willie's child. She initially accepted but then reneged after she lost the child. Do you agree with Aleen's decisions? Or do you think Aleen should have committed to Bertie? If she had married Bertie, how would her life and career have been affected?
12. Were you surprised that none of Aleen's family—her brothers or sister—were willing to reconcile with Aleen and that they didn't show up to the celebration when she received her official RCVS certificate?
13. The word *ambitious* is often used as a negative trait when applied to women but a positive one when referring to men. What other attributes or descriptive words can you think of that connote something different for women than for men?

THE INVINCIBLE MISS CUST

BY PENNY HAW

LEGACY



CELEBRATING 100 YEARS

December 2022 marks the centenary of Aleen Cust finally receiving her veterinary diploma from the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons (RCVS). Compelled to accept women following the passing of the Sex Disqualification Act of 1919, the RCVS formally admitted Aleen to the profession in December 1922—twenty-two years after she'd graduated. As such, she officially became Britain and Ireland's first female veterinary surgeon.

Despite the way the men of the RCVS had treated her, Aleen bequeathed a sizable sum of money to the organization in her will. She stipulated that the funds should be used for a scholarship for veterinary research and that "in deciding between candidates for the scholarship...the council shall give preference to women."

Aleen wasn't only a trailblazer for women in veterinary science, she was also an excellent practitioner who was devoted to her patients and pioneered many techniques. She showed skill and aptitude that exceeded that of many of her male peers. In addition to her dedication and proficiency, she undertook several innovative operations, including the one with her colleague Frederick Hobday, which features in *The Invincible Miss Cust*. Aleen also invented and supplied the range of Cust Rope Release Hobbles for casting horses. Her voluntary work with the war horses on the western front in France during World War I is a further mark of her love for animals and her extraordinary commitment to her profession.

The one hundredth anniversary of Aleen's accreditation by the RCVS is marked in 2022 not only by the publication of *The Invincible Miss Cust* but also by several other events and initiatives. In Ireland, a group of retired veterinary surgeons established the Aleen Cust Memorial Society to celebrate her legacy. Concerned that Aleen had been forgotten by many, the group located her grave in Jamaica, where she died while visiting friends in 1937. When they found her final resting place, the society ensured that the grave was finally recorded in the official registry of St. Andrew's Church in Kingston. This year, the Aleen Cust Memorial Society organized the Aleen Cust Centenary Conference in Galway, Ireland, presenting two days of talks dedicated to the work of Aleen and her legacy.

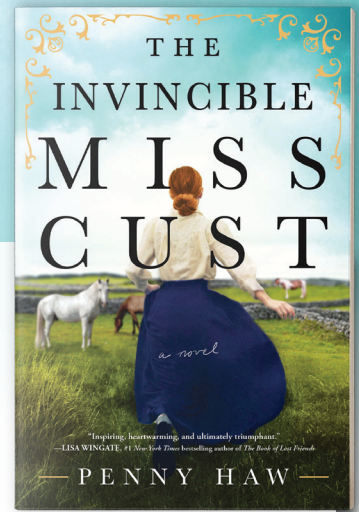
Also in Ireland, a play entitled *A Lone Furrow* is a theatrical account of the life of Aleen. It was written by playwright Tommy Murray, who lives in Roscommon—where Aleen lived and practiced for many years—and was performed by the Roscommon Drama Group to celebrate the centennial. Roscommon County is also the site of a wooden sculpture of Aleen, which was erected in 2020 in the People's Park near Athleague.

Conferences, theatrical performances, statues, and books notwithstanding, Aleen's prevailing legacy is her fortitude, intelligence, and determination to follow a life of purpose and passion despite the many obstacles set before her. Her life is an inspiration to all.

THE INVINCIBLE MISS CUST

BY PENNY HAW

PLAYLIST



THE INVINCIBLE MISS CUST SOUNDTRACK

The best film soundtracks tell stories that cannot be told by images and dialogue. They give emotional depth, and sometimes, after you've watched a movie, the music stays with you long after you've forgotten the plot and characters. What if books came with musical scores? What music might you choose for the novels you read? What songs might carry the story of Aleen Cust's life?

From a lively childhood in the Irish countryside to a difficult time in England as she grappled to find a way to follow her dream, Aleen overcame tragedy and prejudice and was renounced by her family to become Britain and Ireland's first female veterinary surgeon. This eclectic playlist, featuring some of my favorite musicians, reflects the emotions, moods and themes touched upon in the historical fiction about her life, *The Invincible Miss Cust*. I'd love to hear your thoughts about what music you'd listen to while reading the book. —Penny Haw

1. *So Young* by the Corrs
2. *Fields of Gold* by Celtic Woman
3. *Unwritten* by Natasha Bedingfield
4. *The Climb* by Miley Cyrus
5. *Dreams* by Fleetwood Mac
6. *It's My Life* by Bon Jovi
7. *Don't Stop Believin'* by the cast of *Glee*
8. *My Way* by Frank Sinatra
9. *Long Live* by Taylor Swift
10. *You're My Best Friend* by Queen
11. *Cover Me in Sunshine* by P!nk
12. *Here Comes the Sun* by the Beatles
13. *Till I Loved You* by Barbra Streisand and Don Johnson
14. *Love Never Felt So Good* by Justin Timberlake and Michael Jackson
15. *Don't Let the Sun Go Down on Me* by Elton John and George Michael
16. *We've Only Just Begun* by Carpenters
17. *Tears in Heaven* by Eric Clapton
18. *Slipped Away* by Avril Lavigne
19. *One Day I'll Fly Away* by Randy Crawford
20. *Get Up, Stand Up* by Bob Marley & the Wailers
21. *Stronger (What Doesn't Kill You)* by Kelly Clarkson
22. *Warrior* by Demi Lovato
23. *The Foggy Dew* by Sinéad O'Connor and the Chieftains
24. *Roar* by Katy Perry
25. *I Am Woman* by Helen Reddy



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