

A CONVERSATION WITH BARBARA SOMMER

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

After hearing the first-person stories of those involved with the CCC, I began to think about their place in 20th century Minnesota history. My interest in putting the stories into the context of Minnesota and United States history was a major driving force. My sister is an award-winning children's author. She, too, inspired me to take on this writing project.

What research did you undertake in writing *Hard Work and a Good Deal*?

The book is based on the use of oral histories and archival research. The first-person information is drawn from 110 oral histories done with people who were part of the CCC. I did extensive research at many institutions including the National Archives in Washington, DC, the CCC-Indian Division at the National Archives regional facility in Kansas City, the Minnesota Historical Society, the Iron Range Research Center, the Northeast Minnesota Historical Society, and local and county historical societies across Minnesota.

How long did it take to complete the book?

I worked on the book, on and off, for about eight years.

What do you hope readers take away from *Hard Work and a Good Deal*?

I hope the readers gain an understanding of 1930s Minnesota history and the impact of the CCC – the most important conservation program in U.S. history and for the state of Minnesota.

What has your journey as a writer been like?

Writing always has been a part of my professional life. I have published books and articles on various history topics. It had long been a goal of mine to write about Minnesota history. The opportunity presented itself through this book.

What is your biggest dream?

I am a proud fourth-generation Minnesotan. I want to, and will continue documenting Minnesota history through oral histories, archival research, and the written word.

What do you enjoy doing when you're not writing?

I read. I like exploring places throughout Minnesota and surrounding areas, both new ones and old favorites. I also like to travel, especially to visit my children and extended family throughout the United States.

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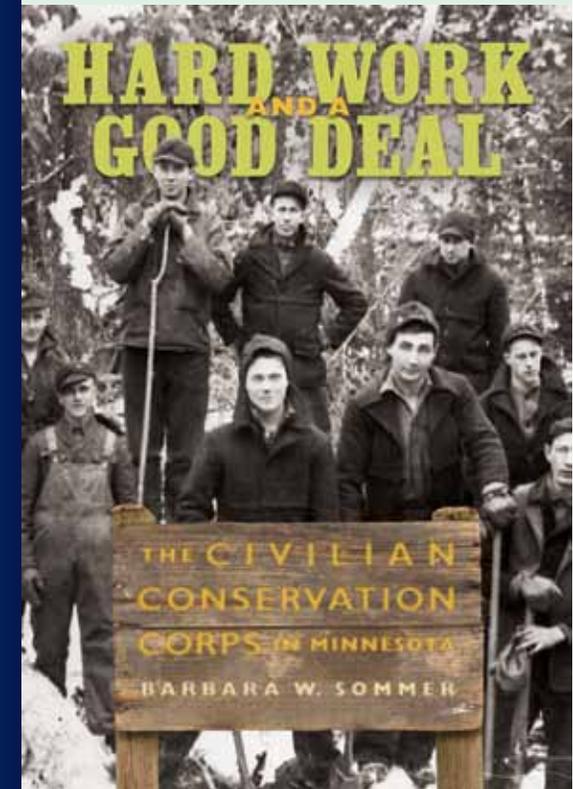
A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards

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Minnesota Winner

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Hard Work and a Good Deal: The Civilian Conservation Corps in Minnesota

by Barbara W. Sommer

PUBLISHED BY MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESS

Hard Work and a Good Deal



SUMMARY:

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), born out of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal at the height of the Great Depression, supplied jobs to more than 77,000 Minnesotans. Hundreds of interviews complement the author's text in this account of the workers' lasting legacy, visible today in Minnesota's thriving forests, state parks, and soil conservation practices.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What did you learn about the Great Depression years in Minnesota, and did the book change your understanding of the Great Depression?
2. Why was the New Deal chosen as the title for Franklin D. Roosevelt's program? Does the title resonate for you, or would you have chosen a different name?
3. What Great Depression stories have been handed down in your family?
4. What did you learn about the CCC's projects in Minnesota that surprised you the most?
5. Prior to reading *Hard Work and a Good Deal*, what did you know about the CCC's work in Minnesota, and what were the sources of this knowledge?
6. What is the value of a book about the Minnesota CCC, both from a historical and present day perspective?
7. The book contains stories taken from oral histories. What is your favorite story?

8. Could a CCC-type federal program work today, and if so, what projects would you like to see the workers tackle?
9. What was the CCC workers' greatest gift to the state of Minnesota?
10. If you could pick any Minnesota history topic to research and write about, what would you choose?

About Barbara Sommer:

Barbara Sommer, a Minnesota native, has spent her career in the field of public history. She has directed and co-directed numerous oral history projects, led oral history workshops, and has presented at state, regional, national, and international conferences. Barbara is a founder of the Oral History Association of Minnesota and the Nebraska Foundation for the Preservation of Oral History. She has taught oral history at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Nebraska Wesleyan University. For more information about the author and her projects, visit www.barbarawsommer.com.



Photo by Scott Strebler



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A CONVERSATION WITH HEID ERDRICH

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

The first section of *National Monuments*, titled "Ghost Nations," responded to monuments of American literature that reference or fail to reference Native people. Soon I turned toward writing about the body as monument and current science regarding human origins.

What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing *National Monuments*?

This book came easily in that one idea flowed toward the next until I felt a groove, but I did have some challenges balancing all the persona poems - where I take on a voice not my own. One editor saw a need for more personal poems. In the end I included three or four poems that were more the author's voice.

What do you like most about the book?

Well, I love having had the chance to work through a big question for me, "Why am I uncomfortable with science that studies the dead?" I also love the cover by Andrea Carlson. She is super talented, and her notion of museum studies as slightly absurd works nicely with my own worldview.

What do you hope your readers take away from

National Monuments?

I hope they think about how indigenous bodies have been devalued and how female bodies are treated. I also hope they see the absurd humor that I see in the ways we read bones.

What has your journey as a writer been like?

I always wanted to write, since I was a little kid. In high school I managed to get published in *Sun Tracks* magazine, and then I thought I was a writer, so I just kept at it. I went to graduate school, but teaching writing for twenty years is really what made me a writer.

How does being a Minnesotan influence your writing?

There is such enormous support for writing here, and Minnesota is such a beautiful place. This state is perfect for writers. But Minnesota is also my ancestral home, the home of the Ojibway, and that is the biggest reason why I live here.

What is your biggest dream?

Gee, it would be nice to live in a peaceful world where poetry was valued. Personally, I would love to earn the support of a granting foundation so I could just be a writer for a year. That would be wonderful beyond belief!

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Poetry Winner

Poems by **HEID E. ERDRICH**



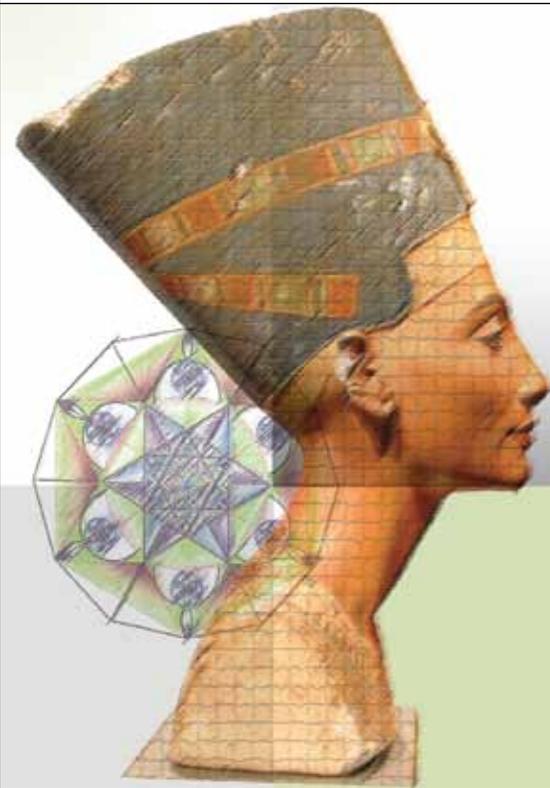
NATIONAL MONUMENTS

National Monuments

by Heid E. Erdrich

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS

National Monuments



SUMMARY:

The depths of national identities and the real people who live them are examined through these poems. Many of the poems explore bodies, particularly the bodies of

indigenous women worldwide, as monuments - in life, in photos, in graves, in traveling exhibitions, and in plastic representations at the airport. There are arguments with historians, archaeologists, William Carlos Williams, and the deeply rooted, conflicting myths of what being American is all about.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What is the collection's main theme? To what extent do themes and other connections tie the poems together?
2. In what way(s) are bodies monuments?
3. Why does science demand desecration of graves and bones? Is it necessary? Who owns a body after death?
4. What has significance to you as a national monument?
5. What would you want your monument to say?
6. What role does humor play in the collection? Which poem(s) use humor most cleverly and effectively?
7. Do you keep old photos that are not good shots, not good enough for an album? Why or why not?
8. What historical, cultural, and/or scientific insights did you gain in reading the collection?

9. What emotions, images, and memories do the poems conjure up?
10. Which poem speaks most directly or deeply to you, and why?

About Heid E. Erdrich:

A member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Ojibway, Heid Erdrich grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota. She earned degrees from Dartmouth College and the John Hopkins University Writing Seminars. Heid has been the recipient of two Minnesota State Arts Board fellowships and awards from The Loft Literary Center and the Bush Foundation. In 2008, she and her sister Louise Erdrich cofounded Birchbark House, a nonprofit clearinghouse for indigenous language-centered literature.

In addition to National Monuments, Heid has published two other poetry collections:

The Mother's Tongue, 2005

Fishing for Myth, 1997

For additional information about the author and her work, visit www.heiderdrich.com.



Photo by Scott Strebler



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A CONVERSATION WITH JULIE KRAMER

Do you have a special enemy named Susan?

No, *Stalking Susan* is not a tale of personal revenge, and I apologize to the Susans out there. I was inspired by two cold cases I covered as a WCCO-TV journalist a decade ago. They involved two women in Saint Paul, both named Susan, strangled on the same day, two years apart. When I sat down to write a novel I first created my character, Riley Spartz, but then needed an adventure for her. Somehow the Susan story came to mind.

How would you describe *Stalking Susan* to someone you met on the street?

It's a cross between *The Da Vinci Code* and *Oh! Susannah*. Seriously, I hate simplifying things like that. I think *Stalking Susan* takes readers inside the desperate world of TV news in a classic serial killer thriller that involves the Bible, the calendar, and a smart heroine pitted against a smart antihero.

Did you know who the killer was when you started writing your book?

No, I sort of made it up as I went along. For awhile I wanted to come up with a believable scenario in which Nick Garnett was the killer.

But I also believed for justice to prevail, the killer needed to die. I grew too fond of Nick to kill him off, and I also wanted to keep him around in case there was a sequel. He seemed like a character with a lot of potential.

What was your writing process like for *Stalking Susan*?

Solitary. Very few people knew I was writing a book until it sold. My kids knew because I kept kicking them off the computer. I kept quiet about it because I have a large extended family (seven siblings), and I didn't want them constantly asking me what page I was on. Now they all want to be in my next book, and that creates its own problems.

What advice do you have for other aspiring writers?

Never give all the characters the same name. That was a major pain. Also, you can go farther than you think in your storytelling. Remember that truth is stranger than fiction.

How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

My books are based in Minnesota and include real life locations and references to real life news events. I think that makes the fiction

seem more real. In fact, I've had people tell me that they've lived in the state their whole lives and don't remember the big explosion on the iron range. That's when I remind them that *Stalking Susan* is a novel, and that 98% of the story is made up.

What is your biggest dream regarding your writing?

To be able to support my family with my books. People assume that because you published a book you're in the same league as John Sandford and Vince Flynn. Just because you're with a big publisher doesn't mean the limo pulls up. In most cases, your spouse is the limo.



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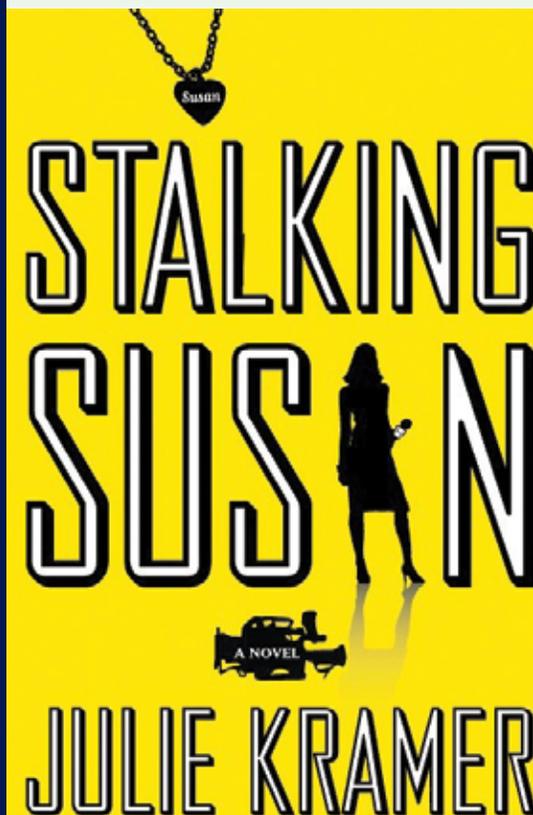
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Stalking Susan

by Julie Kramer

DOUBLEDAY/THE DOUBLEDAY PUBLISHING GROUP

Stalking Susan



The author in the WCCO-TV newsroom.

Photo by Liz Zilka

SUMMARY:

Twin Cities investigative television reporter Riley Spartz discovers that a serial killer is targeting women named Susan, and is killing one on the same day each year. In her attempt to crack the case, Spartz goes up against an uncooperative news director and a politician who fears a serial killer story will hurt Minneapolis' convention business.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. What surprises did you experience in reading *Stalking Susan*?
3. Why did the author choose a pet cremation scam as one of the subplots?
4. Does the book's portrayal of newsroom life give you more sympathy for reporters or a certain level of distrust?
5. How would your experience of reading *Stalking Susan* been different if it was written in third person rather than first person? Why do you think the author chose a first person voice?
6. One of the story's underlying themes is how grief changes people. How does the loss experienced by Riley Spartz, the families of the dead Susans, and Dr. Brent Redding affect their motivations and actions?
7. What techniques did the author use to keep each of the Susans distinctive? Did you find it easy or challenging to keep the Susans straight?
8. Describe the strengths and challenges of Riley and Nick Garnett's relationship. What would you like their future to be?

9. At what point in the book did you figure out the identity of the killer? What clues are given?
10. What are the elements that make a really good mystery, and to what extent are they used in *Stalking Susan*?

About Julie Kramer:

Julie Kramer is a freelance news producer for NBC's "Today Show," "Nightly News," and "Dateline." Prior to that she was an award-winning investigative reporter for WCCO-TV in Minneapolis. Julie grew up along the Minnesota-Iowa state line, the fourth generation of a family who raised cattle and corn for 130 years. Her favorite childhood days were spent waiting for the bookmobile to bring her another Phyllis A. Whitney novel. Julie lives in White Bear Lake with her husband and two sons. The sequel to her first book, Stalking Susan, has been published:

Missing Mark, 2009

For additional information about the author and her work, visit www.juliekramerbooks.com.



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A CONVERSATION WITH CATHERINE FRIEND

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

As someone raised in the city, I was very disconnected from all of my food. But as a farmer I began to understand how much hard work and sacrifice and deep affection for animals was behind the meat we eat. I realized there is a middle ground between being totally oblivious and becoming a vegetarian, which only 5% of the population has done. So I wrote this book for the other 95% to raise the idea that farm animals deserve respect and consideration even if they're destined for the dinner table.

What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing *The Compassionate Carnivore*?

Finding the structure of a nonfiction book is always a challenge, but I really enjoy it. You want to tell the story in such a way that people are engaged and will follow you all the way through the book, and structure is the first step in doing this. What do you share with the reader, and in what order? How do you let the story unfold without overwhelming or confusing the reader? It's a great challenge.

What do you like best about the book?

I love that my editor let me mix all sorts of genres into one book: nonfiction, memoir, self-help, and humor. I also like the cover, the tone, and how it connects different ideas that you wouldn't necessarily put together.

What do you hope your readers take away from *The Compassionate Carnivore*?

I think my ridiculously-long subtitle really summarizes what I hope readers take away from the book: that it is possible to raise animals in a natural, humane environment, keep small farms in business, better protect the environment, and continue eating meat.

What has your journey as a writer been like?

My path to becoming a writer wasn't very direct. I earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in economics, worked in the field for awhile, and then decided I needed something more concrete. I turned to technical writing, which was where I really learned how to write clearly and concisely. Not until my mid-thirties did a friend urge me to give creative writing a try. It was hard at first because up to that point all my writing had been for other people, not for myself. But once I got started, the ideas just kept coming.



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How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

I wonder if being a Norwegian living in a state that gently teases Norwegians makes it easier to poke fun at myself. My natural voice tends toward self-deprecating humor, which may have been harder to develop in a state that lacks a sense of humor. Minnesotans can laugh at themselves, which I think is incredibly healthy.

How do you enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

I enjoy reading, spending time with friends, movies, reading, playing with our three dogs and two cats, walking or biking - oh, and reading.

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THE
COMPASSIONATE
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OR, HOW TO KEEP ANIMALS HAPPY,
SAVE OLD MACDONALD'S FARM, REDUCE
YOUR HOOFPRINT, AND STILL EAT MEAT



CATHERINE FRIEND
Author of *HIT BY A FARM*

The Compassionate Carnivore: Or, How to Keep Animals Happy, Save Old MacDonald's Farm, Reduce Your Hoofprint, and Still Eat Meat

by Catherine Friend

DA CAPO PRESS/PERSEUS BOOKS GROUP

The Compassionate Carnivore



SUMMARY:

Once Catherine Friend bought a farm with her partner and started raising sheep, her attitude about eating meat began to change. Her farming and livestock journey offers critical and witty insight, for meat lovers and vegetarians alike, into how our meat is raised, where and from whom we buy it, and why a change in our meat choices is possible and desirable.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do carnivores have a responsibility to the animals they eat?
2. If you are someone who eats meat, how do you respond to challenges from vegetarians and animal rights activists?
3. What are the biggest challenges facing people who want to change how they eat meat?
4. Are the people you know getting more in touch with the food they eat? What resources are available in your community for people who want to learn more about where their food comes from?
5. What was the most surprising thing you learned about today's farming industry?
6. How did you experience the author's use of humor, and how would the book's message or impact be different without that humor?
7. Have you had a close relationship with any livestock, and if so, have you experienced the unique personality of farm animals?
8. Taking factory, conventional, sustainable, and organic farms into account, what does today's farming industry say about our society as a whole?

9. Are factory farms an essential part of today's society? Is it possible for animals to have a humane existence on a large factory farm, and if so, what needs to be in place to ensure that existence?
10. Has reading *The Compassionate Carnivore* changed you in any ways?

About Catherine Friend:

Catherine Friend is the author of children's picture books, nonfiction books for adults, and romantic adventure novels for adults. She and her partner farm in southeastern Minnesota. Catherine would rather write than wrangle sheep, but she's proud to do both. She has a B.A. in Economics and Spanish and a M.S. in Economics, neither of which she has used for years.

Catherine's recently published books include:

A Pirate's Heart (adult fiction), 2008

The Spanish Pearl (adult fiction), 2007

The Perfect Nest (children's), 2007

The Crown of Valencia (adult fiction), 2007

Hit by a Farm (adult nonfiction), 2006

For additional information about the author and her work, visit www.catherinefriend.com.



Photo by Scott Sreble



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A Conversation with Susan Marie Swanson

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

I love how picture books connect words and text, and how they connect adults and children. And picture books can connect tradition to the present moment. The form of *The House in the Night* was inspired by an old poem that begins, "This is the key of the kingdom." This has long been one of my favorite traditional poems, and it inspired the pattern of this picture book.

How long did it take to complete *The House in the Night*?

Oh, it would be so fascinating to know! I worked and reworked this text many times over the course of more than 10 years. I wonder how many hundreds of times I read the text aloud while I was working on it.

What do you hope people experience with your book?

The House in the Night engages light and dark, comfort and adventure, rest and creativity. I hope that it brings delight and comfort to readers of all ages.

What has your journey as a writer been like?

I have been writing since I was a child, beginning on writing pads that I bought at the dime store on the main street of the small Illinois town where I grew up. During my student years at St. Olaf College, I was lucky to be part of a writing community that included students, professors, and members of the Northfield community. I went on to earn an MFA in poetry at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

When I returned to Minnesota, I began writing poetry with elementary school students and their teachers through COMPAS Writers and Artists in the Schools, which is based in Saint Paul. That set me on the path to writing poetry and picture books for children.

How do you enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

I love to drink coffee with my friends and take long walks by myself. I sing in the alto section of a wonderful choir that rehearses every week. We sing a lot of beautiful poetry!

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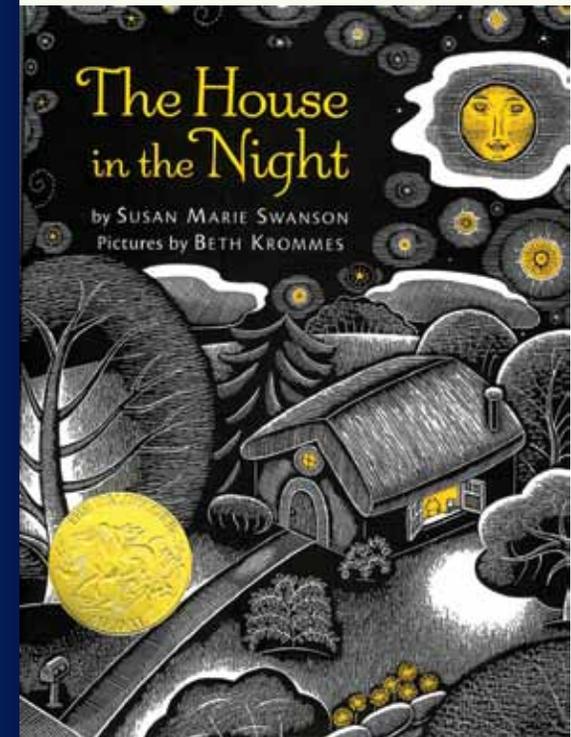
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Children's Literature Winner

Category sponsored by
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The House in the Night

by Susan Marie Swanson,
illustrated by Beth Krommes

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY

The House in the Night



SUMMARY:

In this bedtime story, the rhythmic text and glowing pictures explore the origins of light that make a house a home. The book is about nighttime things that are both comforting and intriguing to children, such as a key, a bed, a book, a light, and the moon.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why do you think the author decided to write about nighttime things?
2. What are your favorite nighttime things?
3. Are there things that sometimes make you scared at night?
4. If you wrote a book called, *The House during the Day*, what favorite daytime things would you include?
5. The author wrote the book in a style that's called poetry. What is poetry?
6. What other books does this story remind you of, and why?
7. What is your favorite book to read before going to sleep, and why is it your favorite?
8. If you wrote a book for children, what would you write about?
9. What is your favorite page in the book, and why?
10. If you illustrated *The House in the Night*, what would your pictures look like?



About Susan Marie Swanson:

Susan Marie Swanson is an award-winning poet and the author of many books, including The First Thing My Mama Told Me, a Charlotte Zolotow Honor Book and New York Times Best Illustrated Book.

Growing up in a small town on the edge of the Chicago area, Susan Marie loved visiting the public library and the bookstore. Both were within walking distance of her house, her school, and a bakery with really good sweet rolls. Susan Marie is a resident of Saint Paul.



Photo by Chris Bohnhoff

Susan Marie's other picture books include:

To Be Like the Sun, 2008

The First Thing My Mama Told Me, 2002

Letter to the Lake, 1998

For additional information about the author and her work, visit www.susanmarieswanson.com.



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A CONVERSATION WITH KAO KALIA YANG

What research did you undertake in writing your award-winning book?

All my life I had been listening to the stories of my family and the explanations for the life we were living in: the refugee camps, the housing projects, the government subsidized houses, and the moldy houses. When I decided to write a book, I began reading all that the world remembered (in English) on the Hmong and what happened in the Secret War in Laos. Collectively, the writing was a piecing together of what my family lived through and the details of a war and its consequences on a people - mostly forgotten if ever known.

How long did it take to complete *The Latehomecomer*?

I began writing the book in 2003 as my grandmother was passing away. I finished it in 2007, and it was published in 2008.

What interesting challenges did you encounter in writing the book?

The most interesting challenge was the structure of the book. I couldn't see it as such for a long time, because I was too keenly aware of how the story

would continue beyond the book - because any ending and/or beginning felt arbitrary.

What do you hope your readers take away from *The Latehomecomer*?

I hope that they will see pieces of themselves reflected in the story I've written. I hope that they will understand that the human story is more powerful than the places, the languages and the cultures that enable it.

How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

This is the BEST state in which to be a young writer. Here, people invite writers into their homes so that they can understand the story better. A writer does not come from a family alone; he or she rises from a community. This is the landscape of my experience - the foundations of my understanding of a bigger world.

What is your biggest dream?

My father says that if you dream in the right direction, the dream only gets bigger. You never wake up and the dream never dies. I wanted to be a writer. Now, I want to live as a writer. I want to inspire writers.

How do you most enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

I like to walk. I enjoy texting and emailing, two forms of exercise that enable and allow me to write. I find peace in folding laundry and doing dishes - productive daily life tasks calm me down.

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A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards

21ST ANNUAL MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

Winner of the
**Memoir & Creative Nonfiction
and Readers' Choice Awards**

*Readers' Choice Award sponsored by the
Pioneer Press and TwinCities.com*

"This is the best account of the Hmong
experience I've ever read—powerful,
heartbreaking, and unforgettable."
—ANNE PADIMAN

THE Latehomecomer

A HMONG FAMILY MEMOIR

Kao Kalia Yang



The Latehomecomer: A Hmong Family Memoir

by Kao Kalia Yang

COFFEE HOUSE PRESS

The Latehomecomer



Photo by Der Yang

SUMMARY:

Born in Thailand's Ban Vinai Refugee Camp, Kao Kalia Yang immigrated to Saint Paul when she was six years old. This is the story of her family's harrowing escape from Laos, their life in refugee camps, the hardships and joys that came with creating a new life in a new land, and Kalia's experiences with American culture and education.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's main themes?
2. Is this a family memoir or the memories of a young woman coming to be?
3. Describe the author's style of writing. How does her use of language affect your experience of her family's story?
4. What does "the latehomecomer" refer to, and why did the author choose it as the title?
5. What pieces of yourself are reflected in the story?
6. The author is fond of the book's circularity. To what extent were you aware of the circular theme, beginning with babies in the sky and ending with her grandmother's death?
7. What have you learned about Hmong culture by reading *The Latehomecomer*?
8. Is the story more about hardship or joy? What keeps Kalia's family strong, and what gets you through difficult times?

9. What title would you choose for your family memoir?
10. Are there images and/or ideas from *The Latehomecomer* that will stay with you forever?

About Kao Kalia Yang:

Kao Kalia Yang is a graduate of Carleton College, and she earned her Master of Fine Arts degree in Creative Nonfiction at Columbia University. She is the co-founder of **Words Wanted**, an agency dedicated to helping immigrants with writing, translating, and business services. The *Latehomecomer* is Kalia's first published book. She wrote "The Place Where We Were Born," a film documenting the experiences of Hmong American refugees, and is working on creative nonfiction books for children. Visit www.kaokaliayang.com for more information about the author and her work.



Photo by Scott Strebler



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Organization (MEMO); Minnesota Library Association (MLA); Minnesota Library Foundation; Minnesota Public Radio (MPR); Pioneer Press & TwinCities.com; The Red Balloon Bookshop; The Saint Paul Almanac; Saint Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN); Secrets of the City; and Twin Cities Public Television (TPT).

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About Louise Erdrich (continued):

family. She has said that listening to her family's stories has in some ways been her most significant literary influence. Both parents encouraged Louise and her siblings to write, her father paying a nickel apiece for their stories.

Louise earned her BA from Dartmouth College in 1976 and her MA from Johns Hopkins University in 1979. Her literary career has included serving as visiting poet and teacher at the North Dakota State Arts Council, writing instructor at Johns Hopkins University, poetry teacher in prisons, and communications director and editor of *The Circle*, a newspaper produced for and by the Native population in Boston. Louise was also employed as a beet weeder, waitress, psychiatric aide, lifeguard, and construction flag signaler.

During the period of 1978-1982, Louise published many poems and short stories. Her

first novel, *Love Medicine*, was published in 1984, followed by *The Beet Queen* in 1986. Louise has won many national and local awards for her writing including four Minnesota Book Awards. *The Plague of Doves* was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. Other recent books by the author include:

The Red Convertible: Collected and New Stories 1978-2008, 2009

The Porcupine Year (children's), 2008

The Painted Drum (adult fiction), 2005

The Game of Silence (children's), 2005

Four Souls (adult fiction), 2004

Original Fire: Selected and New Poems, 2003

The Master Butchers Singing Club (adult fiction), 2003

Books and Islands in Ojibwe Country (adult nonfiction), 2003

Louise lives in Minneapolis and is the owner of Birchbark Books (www.birchbarkbooks.com), a small, independent bookstore near Lake of the Isles in south Minneapolis.

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Minnesota

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Poetry

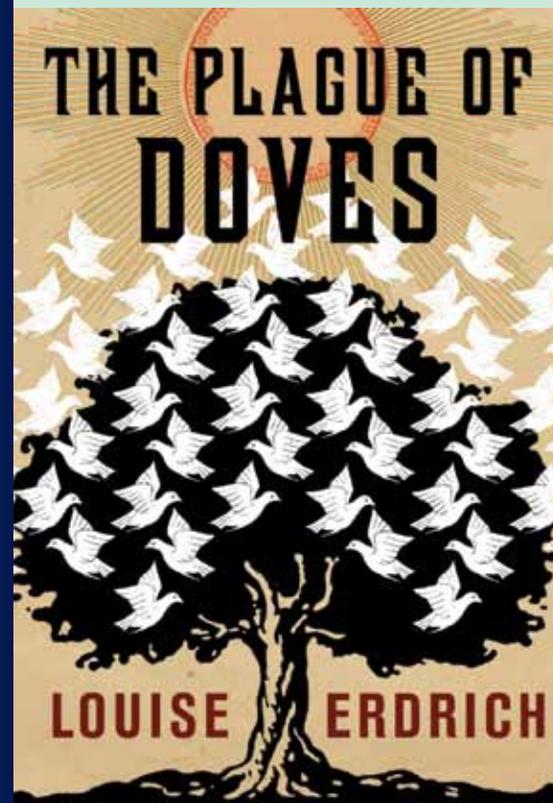
Young People's Literature

A Reading and Discussion Guide Prepared by the Minnesota Book Awards

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MINNESOTA BOOK AWARDS

Novel & Short Story Winner



The Plague of Doves
by Louise Erdrich

HARPERCOLLINS PUBLISHERS

The Plague of Doves



Photo by Persia Erdrich

SUMMARY:

The unsolved murder of a farm family haunts the small, white, off-reservation town of Pluto, North Dakota. The vengeance exacted for this crime, and the subsequent distortions of truth transform the lives of Ojibwe living on the nearby

reservation and shape the passions of both communities for the next generation. Bound by love and torn by history, the collective stories of the two communities come together in a wrenching truth that is revealed in the novel's final pages.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's themes?
2. What is the symbolic meaning of the doves?
3. The author uses individual stories to weave the overall plot. To what extent did these individual stories enrich your reading experience and/or did you experience them as a distraction?
4. In what ways does *The Plague of Doves* resemble a traditional mystery? Are there ways in which it differs from a traditional mystery?
5. How does your understanding of Mooshum change by the end of the book?
6. How does Evelina grow and change over time? What factors most shape her identity?
7. What is the significance of Evelina's fascination with Paris?
8. How would the reading experience be different if the novel's scope covered fewer generations and introduced fewer characters?

9. What cultural and/or historical insights did you gain in reading the book?
10. The novel's second to last paragraph reads, "The wind will blow. The devils rise. All who celebrate shall be ghosts. And there will be nothing but eternal dancing, dust on dust, everywhere you look." What is meant by these lines?

About Louise Erdrich:

Louise Erdrich is a Native American author of novels, short stories, nonfiction, poetry, and children's books. The eldest of seven children, she was born in Little Falls, Minnesota, to parents Ralph Erdrich, a German-American, and Rita Erdrich, of Ojibwe and French descent. Louise grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota where her parents taught at the Bureau of Indian Affairs school.

The oral tradition of Ojibwe storytelling was a part of Louise's life as were the stories her father told about his



Photo by Scott Strebile



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A CONVERSATION WITH BRIAN MALLOY

What inspired you to write your award-winning book?

I taught at the University of Minnesota, and many of the creative nonfiction pieces from my students focused on discovering that their boyfriend or crush was gay. Some of these pieces were funny, others poignant. Often the friendship survived, which I found intriguing. That's what inspired me to write *Twelve Long Months*.

What research did you undertake in writing *Twelve Long Months*?

I held focus groups with high school students active in Gay/Straight Student Alliance and with freshmen women at the University of Minnesota. I wanted to get their perspective on how sexual orientation was discussed (or not) among teens and understand the range of reactions gay students can expect when they come out.

One of the settings in the book is Columbia University, a place I have never visited. I visited the Columbia website and blogs by students. I took a virtual tour of the campus and researched the New York neighborhood where it is located. I also researched academic requirements and course offerings.

What do you hope readers take away from the book?

That friendship is every bit as important as romance.

What do you like most about *Twelve Long Months*?

Most interesting to me was taking a working-class teen from Le Sueur, Minnesota and putting her in a privileged, big city setting. At first she is intimidated by her new surroundings, but eventually she comes to appreciate both places she lives.

What has your journey as a writer been like?

I had always wanted to be a writer, but didn't get serious about it until my brother was diagnosed with cancer. We had a long talk about dreams deferred, and he encouraged me to make time to write. I dedicated my first novel to him.

It was a challenge of the first order to get my work published. I could not get an agent to represent me, so I ended up selling my first book myself. Today I still represent myself.

How does being a Minnesotan inform your writing?

I moved to Minnesota in 1978, so I do feel like a

native, although I am originally from Philadelphia. Weather plays a role in all my books, informing the story's mood and atmosphere. My first novel is entitled *The Year of Ice*. For my second novel, I wanted to include the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, a place I love and visit often for solo trips. My partner is from Le Sueur, and I have visited it often. I wanted to create a rural sensibility for *Twelve Long Months*, and turned to Le Sueur for the setting.

How do you enjoy spending time when you're not writing?

I love making solo trips through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, reading, and spending time with my dogs.



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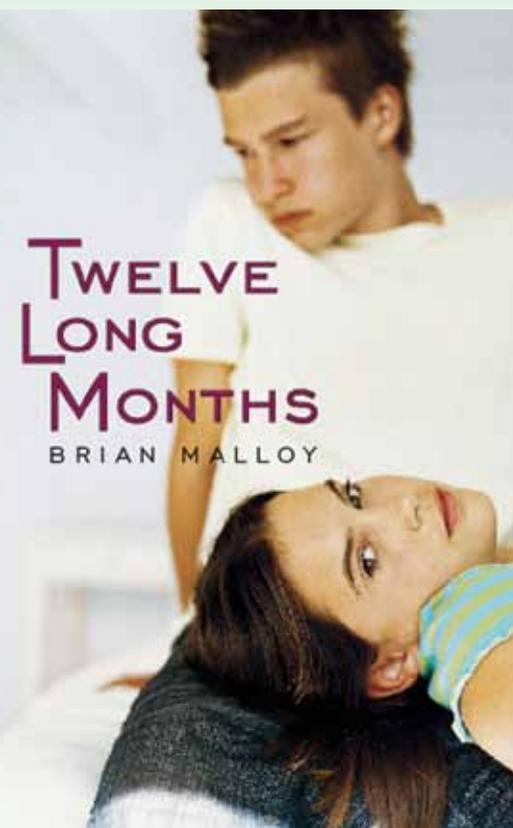
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Winner

Category sponsored by
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Twelve Long Months

by Brian Malloy

SCHOLASTIC PRESS/SCHOLASTIC, INC.

Twelve Long Months



SUMMARY:

Molly Swain is hopelessly in love with Mark, the only thing she finds of interest in their small Minnesota town. She starts to wonder if she and Mark will ever be more than lab partners, and then she discovers they will both be moving to New York following high school graduation. In New York, however, Molly discovers that Mark has been keeping a secret, and it turns out she's not his type at all.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the book's themes?
2. Have you ever been in a situation like Molly's? Did your unrequited crush and you remain friends, or did the relationship end?
3. In what ways do Molly's opinions of Le Sueur and New York change and/or stay the same over the course of the novel?
4. What is your opinion of Mark, and is he a good friend to Molly?
5. Molly is embarrassed that she fell for a gay man, while Lily is embarrassed that she is dating a white man. How are their situations similar, and how are they different?
6. All of the "E"'s experience boyfriend troubles. Who do you think handles her relationship the best? Who handles it the worst?
7. How might the story be different if Molly and Mark went to school at a Minnesota college campus instead of Columbia University?
8. As an author, do you think it would be easier or harder to set a book in two or more locations, instead of just one?
9. What is your opinion of Simon, and do you initially believe his version of events or Mark's?
10. What do you think lies ahead for both Molly and Mark?
11. If you wrote a book for a teen audience, what would you choose for the theme and title?

About Brian Malloy

Originally from Philadelphia, Brian Malloy is a resident of Minneapolis. He is adjunct faculty in the MFA programs at the University of Minnesota and Hamline University, and serves as Education Director for The Loft Literary Center. Brian has also taught creative writing and literature at Emerson College in Boston. He published two novels prior to *Twelve Long Months*:

Brendan Wolf, 2007

The Year of Ice, 2002

For more information about the author and his work, visit www.malloywriter.com.



Photo by Scott Strebler



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