

LIVING IN THE MODERN RURAL WEST

BOOK DISCUSSION SERIES
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Reading Materials

This document provides information about the reading materials for this theme, including a complete list of available titles, as well as book summaries and author information for each.

Complete Book List

Included below is the complete list of books which have been vetted and recommended for this theme, and which are available in inventory from the ICfL.

- *Standoff: Standing Rock, the Bundy Movement, and the American Story of Sacred Lands*, by Jacqueline Keeler. Published 2021, 220 pages.
- *The Cassandra*, by Sharma Shields. Published 2019, 304 pages.
- *American Sunrise*, by Joy Harjo. Published 2019, 144 pages.
- *Uprooted: Recovering the Legacy of the Places We've Left Behind*, by Grace Olmstead. Published 2021, 272 pages.
- *The Water Knife*, by Paola Bacigalupi. Published 2015, 384 pages.
- *Hole in the Sky*, by William Kittredge. Published 1992, 238 pages.
- *Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age*, by Susan Swetnam. Published 2000, 128 pages.
- *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in an Unknown Country*, by Kim Barnes. Published 1997, 272 pages.
- *Indian Creek Chronicles*, by Pete Fromm. Published 2003, 208 pages.
- *The Solace of Open Spaces*, by Gretel Ehrlich. Published 1986, 144 pages.
- *This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind*, by Ivan Doig. Published 1980, 336 pages.
- *Traplines: Coming Home to the Sawtooth Valley*, by John Rember. Published 2004, 256 pages.
- *Winter Range*, by Claire Davis. Published 2001, 262 pages.
- *That Wild County: An Epic Journey Through the Past, Present, and Future of America's Public Lands*, by Mark Kenyon. Published 2019, 299 pages.
- *The Four Winds*, by Kristin Hannah. Published 2021, 464 pages.

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Book Summaries & Author Information

Included on the following pages are the detailed summaries of each book available for this theme, as well as background information about the author.

Standoff: Standing Rock, the Bundy Movement, and the American Story of Sacred Lands, by Jacqueline Keeler. Published 2021, 220 pages.

The year 2016 saw two high-profile governmental protests. The first began in January at the Headquarters of Oregon's Malheur National Wildlife Preserve, the second in April at the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in the Dakotas. Both sets of protesters believed in their sovereign right to a particular landscape, and each had a conflict with a federal government authority—the first over the constitutionality of federal land management and grazing rights and the second over the proposed construction of an oil pipeline running under sacred native land. This book by Jacqueline Keeler—a writer of Diné and Yankton Dakota heritage—compares the ways in which these two protests were received and managed by government authorities, the press, and the individuals involved. Keeler wrestles with the deep complexities of land ownership, the legacy of ranching, and the rights of heritage while conducting a careful appraisal of America's history and treatment of Native Americans.

Author Information

Jacqueline Keeler is an American writer of Diné and Yankton Dakota heritage who co-founded Eradicating Offensive Native Mascotry (EONM), which seeks to end the use of Native American racial groups as mascots as well as stereotypical representations in popular culture.

The Cassandra, by Sharma Shields. Published 2019, 304 pages

This book centers around Mildred Groves, a young woman thrilled to land a secretarial position at the prestigious Hanford Research Center, which borders the Columbia River and takes up 586-square-miles of shrub-steppe desert. Set during the 1940s at the height of WWII, Mildred is an unusual protagonist—both gifted and cursed with the ability to see the future. Mildred's capacity for prophecy brings fearsome premonitions that continue to escalate, including dying



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children, and countless burn victims, all casualties of Hanford's mysterious "product" (which turns out to be plutonium for the atom bomb). Compelled to deliver her warnings about Hanford's "product," Mildred finds her grave messages falling on deaf ears, wondering "How much would we improve as a human race if we listened to the warnings given to us?" Inspired by the Greek myth of Cassandra, the novel wrestles with themes of gender inequity and the ethical question of how prosperity and advancement (strong frontier themes throughout the west) relate to technological achievement at the expense of human life. The novel also addresses Mildred's realization of her own whiteness and colonialism, which informs her knowledge of the atom bomb's potential effect. The novel contains some scenes of sexual violence.

Author Information

Sharma Shields' short stories and essays have appeared in *The New York Times*, *Slate*, *Kenyon Review*, *Iowa Review*, and *Fugue*, and have garnered such prizes as the 2020 PNBA Award, 2016 Washington State Book Award, the Autumn House Fiction Prize, the Tim McGinnis Award for Humor, a Grant for Artist Projects from Artist Trust, and the A.B. Guthrie Award for Outstanding Prose. Sharma runs a small press, Scablands Books, and is a contributing editor for *Moss*.

American Sunrise, by Joy Harjo. Published 2019, 144 pages

A member of the Muscogee Nation and the first Native American to be named Poet Laureate for the United States, Joy Harjo's poems are accessible, easy to read, and powerful. This penetrating collection speaks with a voice of long-standing anger and compassion: "The children were stolen from these beloved lands by the government./ ... / ...they were lined up to sleep alone in their army-issued cages." Harjo is referring to the Native American children forced from their homes in the 19th century, but the timeliness of her words brings to mind the present conditions at the U.S. Southern border. The collection speaks to the ongoing fight for Native American sovereignty and integrity, and it reverberates with a plea for all Americans to begin taking responsibility for what has been—and continues to be done—in the name of the United States. Harjo's poetry is a firm indictment of the long-standing treatment of Native Americans throughout American history. The poems collected in *American Sunset* may be highly readable, but they succeed in holding contradictory truths and beg hard questions of us all.

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Author Information

Joy Harjo is a member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation serving her second term as the 23rd Poet Laureate of the United States. She is the author of nine books of poetry, and her honors include the Ruth Lily Prize for Lifetime Achievement from the Poetry Foundation, the Academy of American Poets Wallace Stevens Award, two NEA fellowships, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Harjo has produced seven award-winning music albums. She is a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, Board of Directors Chair of the Native Arts & Cultures Foundation, and she holds a Tulsa Artist Fellowship. She lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Uprooted: Recovering the Legacy of the Places We've Left Behind, by Grace Olmstead.
Published 2021, 272 pages

Part memoir, part journalistic investigation, *Uprooted* is true to its title, focusing on a life the author has chosen to leave in rural, small-town Emmett, Idaho. Avoiding overt sentimentality, Olmstead instead focuses on the lives of those who helped build the town's farming community, including Olmstead's grandparents and great-grandparents, who also provided Olmstead with an idyllic childhood. The changes occurring since Olmstead left Emmett in the name of economic and cultural progress bring a complicated mix of loss and gain. As Olmstead contemplates a return to Emmett, she looks at the challenges associated with this small agricultural town's chances of survival and the attitudes often associated with these particular places: "It's easy to exploit places we don't know, places we believe to be unimportant. It's easy to think the soil can last forever if you know nothing of it. But extraction of value at the expense of the land and its people destroys both the "nowheres" and the "somewheres," if you give it time." Ultimately, Olmstead asks a hard question of her readers—what do we owe the "nowheres" and the "somewheres" we leave behind?

Author Information

Grace Olmstead is a journalist who focuses on farming, localism, and family. Her writing has been published in *The American Conservative*, *The Week*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *National Review*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Christianity Today*. A native of rural Idaho, she now lives outside of Washington, DC, with her husband and three children.



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The Water Knife, by Paola Bacigalupi. Published 2015, 384 pages

This science fiction novel is set in the not-too-distant future where an American Southwest is ravaged by drought, (Arizona, Nevada, California). Warming temperatures and climatic conditions have reduced the Colorado River and its major tributaries (an essential water source for the region) to a trickle, and armed conflicts for dwindling river portions are routine as robber barons reign. Angel Velasquez is a "water knife," an unofficial, covert operative of the corrupt Southern Nevada Water Authority, which holds a vested interest in luxury resort development. This deeply researched novel provides background on the geology, history, and politics of water rights and usage in the U.S. while tackling the ethical debates related to humankind and its obligation to the planet. The book's focus is also on the theme of interconnectedness in the face of deregulation, privatization, and the concentration of power in the hands of a few, asking what happens when "all the rules had stopped existing."

Author Information

Paolo Bacigalupi's writing has appeared in *Wired Magazine*, *Slate*, *Medium*, *Salon.com*, and *High Country News*, as well as *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* and *Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*. His short fiction has been nominated for three Nebula Awards, four Hugo Awards, and won the Theodore Sturgeon Memorial Award for best science fiction short story of the year.

Hole in the Sky, by William Kittredge. Published 1992, 238 pages

Hole in the Sky traces the life of William Kittredge. As a child, Kittredge grew up on his family's Warner Valley ranch in the southeastern Oregon desert country, and he felt deep connections to the land and to the cowboys who worked it. As he aged, life became more complicated, as the tensions and dissolutions within his family, new ideas about land use, and his own struggles to come to terms with himself.

Author Information

William Kittredge was born in Portland, Oregon, on August 14, 1932. His family ranched in the Warner Valley in Southeastern Oregon on the ranch his grandfather built and his father gave up law school to work on. He earned a degree in general agriculture from Oregon State University

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in 1954 and a M.F.A. from the University of Iowa Writers Workshop in 1969. He held a Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University, has been awarded National Endowment for the Arts grants, and the Fiction International Award for two collections of short stories. He is also the recipient of the Montana Governor's Award for Literature, the Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Award for Excellence, and the Neil Simon Award for his work on the film Heartland.

Home Mountains: Reflections from a Western Middle Age, by Susan Swetnam. Published 2000, 128 pages

After a youth spent in the East in quiet discontent, Susan Swetnam writes about the middle-age surprise of finding herself at home in southeastern Idaho. The book's autobiographical essays chronicle her attempts to come to terms with various "homes"—with the beautiful expanses and sometimes quirky occupants of the Intermountain West, but also with life choices, with family, with love, with responsibility, and with the need to keep adapting to life's ongoing changes. Essay topics range from the surprise of winning a blue ribbon at the Eastern Idaho State Fair, to mountain rambling, to fighting fires, to accepting the blessings of a love which can only be temporary. Youth is hardly the apex of life, Swetnam concludes; middle age, too, can be a time of deep satisfaction, a time of dawning self-realization. Home Mountains was honored by the Idaho Library Association in 2000.

Author Information

Susan Swetnam was born in Philadelphia in 1950 and educated at the University of Delaware and the University of Michigan. She came to Idaho in 1979 to teach at Idaho State University. A professor of English and a writer, she has published essays and articles in a wide variety of national, regional, and literary magazines, including Gourmet, Mademoiselle, and Black Canyon Quarterly. She won a writer's residency from Washington State's Espy Foundation in 2004. In addition to Home Mountains, she has published book-length studies of Mormon pioneer life story writing and of Idaho writer Grace Jordan, as well as a collection of personal essays about teaching (My Best Teachers Were Saints, 2006). She has been active in public humanities programming in Idaho, including Let's Talk About It programs for more than twenty years, as was her late husband, poet Ford Swetnam.



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In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in an Unknown Country, by Kim Barnes. Published 1997, 272 pages

In the Wilderness is a memoir about growing up in the isolated logging camps of North Idaho during the 1960s, a work about family and identity. Kim Barnes' parents moved from the Oklahoma dustbowl to North Idaho, where her father became a logger and the family lived a modest but happy life. Then, in the economic downturn on the 1960s and with mechanization, loggers' jobs began disappearing. Barnes' father was determined to stay on, however, and the family sought community and consolation in a Pentecostal sect. This conversion had a profound effect on the family, influencing everything from dress to gender roles to fundamental assumptions about the world. At first docile, Barnes rebelled as an adolescent. Full of anecdotal detail, uncompromising and painful, the memoir depicts a young woman's struggles to discover who she is. It traces a passage into, as Barnes has written, "a wilderness that was something other than physical: the wilderness brought on by physical isolation; the wilderness that is the sexuality of a young girl coming of age in such an isolated environment; and the wilderness of our souls, from which our church helped to save us." Admitting that she still carries "resentment and bitterness," Barnes nevertheless demonstrates in this narrative that she "can live in the wilderness and outside of it, that I can embrace the whole." The book's ending depicts the narrator's return to the beloved woods of her youth. *In the Wilderness* was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in 1997.

Author Information

Kim Barnes was born in 1958 in North Idaho and grew up in isolated logging camps. In the mid-1960s, her family joined the Pilgrim Holiness Church in Pierce, becoming members of a fundamentalist sect related to snake-handlers. Barnes was a rebellious adolescent, and after her graduation from Lewiston High School (as a member of the National Honor Society) she held a variety of jobs. In the early 1980s, she enrolled in Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, studying English. There she met her husband, the poet and professor Robert Wrigley. Barnes currently teaches at the University of Idaho and writes poetry, short stories, and memoir. Her work has appeared in a variety of literary magazines, including *Shenandoah* and *The Georgia Review*. She is co-editor with Mary Blew of *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*. In addition to *In the Wilderness*, she is also author of a second memoir, *Hungry for the World*, and several novels. She lives in Moscow, Idaho, with her husband and two children.



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Indian Creek Chronicles, by Pete Fromm. Published 2003, 208 pages.

Named a Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Book of the Year when it was published, Pete Fromm's account of his seven months in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness of the Idaho panhandle reads at times like the story of the mountain man he played at being when he signed up to keep watch over a couple of million salmon eggs at the remote hatchery. When Fromm came to the University of Montana from his native Wisconsin to major in wildlife biology and to participate on the swimming team, his roommate, who had worked as a seasonal ranger, introduced him to books like A. B. Guthrie, Jr.'s *The Big Sky*, and before he knew it, Fromm fell in love with the mystique of Jim Bridger and Jeremiah Johnson. At age twenty, he accepted a job with Idaho Fish and Game on the very "romantic whim" the warden warns against, but he soon proves himself a capable outdoorsman. Fromm splices his narrative, which reads much like a novel, with self-deprecating humor, but in fact, he proves equal to the challenges of isolation and intense cold. He turns out to be an excellent shot, supplementing his diet with rabbit, grouse, and finally an illegally bagged moose. About midway through the book Fromm observes a mountain lion hunt led by a group of outfitters, and in that context, we detect some misgivings about his mountain man values, but generally he does not confront the issues. That matter is left to the reader. And in this respect, Fromm's book varies considerably from Gretel Ehrlich's *The Solace of Open Spaces*, to which it relates as something of an anti-type.

Author Information

Born in 1958 and raised in Wisconsin, Pete Fromm majored in wildlife biology at the University of Montana. He worked for several years as a seasonal ranger for the National Park Service. An avid reader, Fromm says in an interview (2001) that he stumbled into a couple of creative writing courses while at UM and began writing full-time in 1990 after his first publication. Attracted to Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, Fromm notes that he was struck by "the stunningly literate line," "Nick liked to open cans." His first book, *Tall Uncut* (1992), was a collection of short stories about "hunting and fishing, of long car trips through open landscape." In total Fromm has published five novels, two memoirs, and five short story collections. His most recent novel *A Job You Mostly Won't Know How to Do* was published in 2019.



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The Solace of Open Spaces, by Gretel Ehrlich. Published 1986, 144 pages.

In his famous canonical poem, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” William Wordsworth expressed his confidence in the healing powers of nature. But the scenery on the banks of the river Wye in 1798 appears to have been far more attractive than that of north central Wyoming where, during the six-month long winters, Gretel Ehrlich observes on the opening page, “The landscape hardens into a dungeon of space.” Yet as the title of the book indicates, she found “solace” in the wind-swept landscape near the Big Horn Mountains when she arrived in 1976 to shoot a film. After the death of her Welsh lover, Ehrlich returned to Wyoming to grieve and to rebuild her life. In the dozen essays that constitute this short book, Ehrlich reflects on the toughness it takes to live in the harsh solitude, some of which she experiences by going on drives with sheep herders. “Living with animals,” Ehrlich writes in reference not only to sheep and cows, but also to horses and dogs, “makes us redefine our ideas about intelligence” (64). More than most other writers in this series, Ehrlich balances her attention between the landscape and the people she meets, and she recounts her courtship with Press Stephens, who ran a small sheep ranch and to whom she was briefly married. Throughout the book we are aware of Ehrlich’s powers as the poet of this “unaccountably libidinous place.” For some readers, however, the most appealing moments may be those that appear in the form of aphorisms, the vulnerable (because they are so naked and open to attack), epigrammatic assertions that dominate the title essay; for example, “In all this open space, values crystallize quickly” (10). To the extent that this book amounts to a “gendered” account, it bears comparison (and notably, contrast) with Pete Fromm’s *Indian Creek Chronicles*.

Author Information

Born in 1946 on a horse ranch near Santa Barbara, California, Gretel Ehrlich attended Bennington College and took courses at the UCLA Film School and at the New School for Social Research in New York City. She has been twice married and divorced. Her first two books were collections of poetry published by small presses, but the publication of *The Solace of Open Spaces* in 1985 brought her writing to the attention of a broad audience. Her nonfiction has been published in such anthologies as *Best American Essays*, *Best Spiritual Writing*, and *The Nature Reader*. Her novel, *Heart Mountain*, centered on the Japanese internment camp in Wyoming during World War II, appeared in 1987 and was praised for its “beautifully crafted prose.” In 1991 Ehrlich was struck by lightning while at her ranch in Wyoming and was severely

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injured. While undergoing treatment in California, she worked on *A Match to the Heart* (1994), which deals with her struggle toward full recovery. Since then, Ehrlich has traveled and written extensively. She divides her time between California and Wyoming.

This House of Sky: Landscapes of a Western Mind, by Ivan Doig. Published 1980, 336 pages.

This House of Sky consists of three story skeins: It is an autobiography of Doig's own growing up in Montana, the story of a unique, nontraditional family trinity and how it held together through thick and thin, and a portrait of a western way of life. All three are knitted together to present a very loving, but elegiac prose poem—elegiac because of the author's mournful contemplation of his growing up which entails a wrenching away from loved ones, because the family trinity of which he was a part has dissolved through the death of two of its members, and because a way of life which sustained him throughout his childhood has also virtually passed into history. While Doig doesn't protest the dying, he does mourn and memorialize it, and he takes away those qualities of endurance, courage and honesty Charlie and Bessie Ringer and all the others presented to him as a young boy growing into manhood.

Author Information

Ivan Doig was born in White Sulphur Springs, Montana, in 1939 and grew up along the Rocky Mountain Front where much of his writing takes place. His first book, the highly acclaimed memoir *This House of Sky*, was a finalist for the National Book Award. A former ranch hand, newspaperman, and magazine editor, Doig is a graduate of Northwestern University where he received bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism. He also holds a Ph.D. in history from the University of Washington. Doig is the only living writer with books in the top dozen on both lists: English Creek in fiction and *This House of Sky* in non-fiction. He lives in Seattle with his wife Carol, who has taught the literature of the American West.

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Traplines: Coming Home to the Sawtooth Valley, by John Rember. Published 2004, 256 pages.

In this memoir, John Rember recounts his experiences of growing up in the Sawtooth Valley at a time when fish were wild in the rivers and electric light seemed magical. His father was a trapper/fishing guide, and everyone in his family—including his mother—hunted. After he moved back home as an adult in 1987, Rember realizes that those same experiences no longer seem to possess the authenticity that they once did. The rural West, he discovers, has been transformed, both as a place to live and as a terrain of the imagination. Funny, beautiful, and philosophical, this book weaves memories and reflections into an anecdotal narrative which displays deep affection for place and family. Not only has the place where he grew up changed, he realizes, but he has, too. Reviewers called *Traplines* “a requiem, of sorts, for one of the last best places,” a “voyage to self-consciousness,” and “a captivating and contemplative look at how we have evolved our communities in the rural West.”

Author Information

John Rember is a fourth-generation Idahoan who was born in Sun Valley and grew up in the Sawtooth Valley. His mother was a nurse, his father drove a ski bus and worked as a miner, fishing and hunting guide, trapper, and mechanic. Rember was educated at Harvard and earned an MFA at the University of Montana. He has written numerous articles, stories, and essays for publications ranging from *Travel and Leisure* to *Skiing Magazine* to *Wilderness Conservation*, and his work has been often anthologized. His memoir, *Traplines* was named Idaho Book of the Year in 2004 by the Idaho Library Association. His most recent book, *A Hundred Little Pieces at the End of the World*, is a collection of essays on climate change, population, resource depletion and mass extinction described as “distilled in equal measure from the spirits of Norman MacLean’s *A River Runs Through It* and Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*.”

Winter Range, by Claire Davis. Published 2001, 262 pages.

Winter Range, a dark and haunting novel, is set in the cattle-ranching country of north-eastern Montana. Touching on issues of class and isolation, it traces a winter that turns violent when Ike Parsons, a recent immigrant to the region and town sheriff, attempts to help Chas Stubblefield, a cattleman down on his luck and crazed with loneliness and resentment. Ike’s own wife Pattiann, the sheriff discovers, was once a wild young woman who kept company with

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Chas, and she is drawn once again to reach out to Chas. Believing that he has been betrayed by bankers, filled with angry memories of his abusive father, furious at others whose lives appear to be contented, Chas is in the process of killing his own cattle as the novel begins. By the end, he will have killed more than livestock. *Winter Range* won the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association prize for Best First Novel in 2001.

Author Information

Claire Davis has told an interviewer that she was an avid reader who began writing stories as soon as she could write, continuing the lives of characters because she could not bear to see books end. She was born and raised in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, then lived as a young married woman on a small farm outside Milwaukee. In her thirties, she returned to writing. She earned a degree from the writing program at the University of Montana in the early 1990s and now teaches at Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho. Her work has appeared in many literary magazines, including the *Southern Review* and the *Gettysburg Review*, and her stories have appeared in Pushcart anthologies. In addition to *Winter Range*, she is also the author of another novel, *Skin of the Snake* (2005), and a collection of short stories, *Labors of the Heart* (2006).

That Wild County: An Epic Journey Through the Past, Present, and Future of America's Public Lands, by Mark Kenyon. Published 2019, 299 pages.

Mark Kenyon's Prologue chronicles the 2016 Ammon Bundy Malheur occupation, an incident which pushed the "land-transfer movement,"—an idea based on the unconstitutionality of federal oversight of public lands—to the forefront of American media. Kenyon's debut novel *That Wild Country* positions Bundy (and others questioning the federal management of public lands) in direct opposition to his own values and ideology, shaped through a lifetime of hunting and enjoying the pleasures found in recreating on public lands. Progressing through eight separate national parks or wilderness areas, Kenyon combines personal experience with well-researched history, documenting the progression of the public land movement in the United States. Part travelogue, part historiography, Kenyon's book culminates in an honest look at the tensions surrounding contemporary land ownership and what's at stake for the future of America—a country whose once-bold vision for public wilderness spaces will most certainly remain under siege.

Author Information



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Mark Kenyon is a lifelong outdoorsman, a nationally published outdoor writer, and one of the hunting and fishing community's most prominent voices through this podcast *Wired to Hunt*. His writing has appeared in *Outdoor Life* and *Field & Stream*, and he is a leading contributor to *MeatEater, Inc.*, an outdoor-lifestyle company founded on the belief that a deeper understanding of the natural world enriches all our lives.

Questions in Relation to "A More Perfect Union"

1. Mark Kenyon weaves in descriptions of his personal travel with environmental history throughout the book. How does this technique shape the public wilderness spaces as you read?
2. According to Kenyon, what is the urgent threat to public lands in the US?
3. Does the fact that Kenyon is an avid hunter (much like President Theodore Roosevelt) lend him more credibility in his advocacy for public lands? Why or why not?
4. As Kenyon recounts traveling through these eight public land locations, he concludes with a sense of urgency for their continued preservation. What do you think of Kenyon's call to action, asking readers to join the "Keep It Public" Movement?
5. The shared aspect of public lands—the fact that prairie dog hunters share space with birders in Malheur Preserve, for example, or mountain bikers often share the trails with ATVs—has always been a crucial element of their appeal. What do these spaces have to teach about compromise?
6. Wallace Stegner in his Wilderness Letter to the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission said, "We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope." What do you make of Stegner's claim?

The Four Winds, by Kristin Hannah. Published 2021, 464 pages.

Beginning in Texas in 1921, we meet the twenty-five-year-old Elsa Wolcott, a reticent young woman whose life trajectory alters after a night out and chance encounter with Rafe Martinelli, leading to pregnancy and a quick marriage. Fast forward to 1934 and the Martinelli farm (and marriage) is failing amidst both parched earth and parched economies, the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression working in tandem. But echoes of *The Grapes of Wrath* aside, Hannah offers up a story that includes a complicated mother-daughter relationship between Elsa and her teenaged daughter Loreda, and the tough decision the two face—whether to move west to the promise of California prosperity or stay in Texas and risk a dusty death. Challenges associated with migrant labor and tensions between the haves and the have-nots frame Hannah's

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narrative as themes of perseverance, fortitude, and loyalty are woven throughout the historical tableau. Hannah's novel brings forth a story rooted in one of the most challenging time periods in our nation's history.

Author Information

Kristin Hannah is a former-lawyer-turned writer who lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband. Hannah had breakthrough success in 2009 with the novel *Firefly Lane*. *Four Winds* is her 24th novel.

Questions in Relation to “A More Perfect Union”

1. How does Hannah set up cultural expectations of the period?
2. Throughout the novel, the theme of The American Dream loom large—in what ways does this dream shape the characters?
3. How does the idea of land ownership and a sense of place shape Hannah's story?
4. What does Hannah's novel reveal about the human spirit? Do you see any parallels between Hannah's story and life during the pandemic?
5. What did you think of the ways in which the mother-daughter relationship is depicted? Did you find it realistic? Why or why not?
6. Do you see parallels between Hannah's depiction of migrant workers traveling south to California and the contemporary treatment of immigrants searching for work?