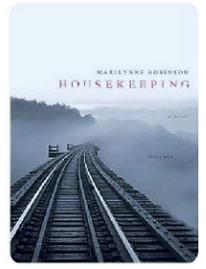


# Tough Paradise



## WHY AM I READING THIS?

In 1995 the Idaho Humanities Council received an Exemplary Award from the National Endowment for the Humanities to conduct a special project highlighting the literature of Idaho and the Intermountain West. "Tough Paradise" explores the relationships between place and human psychology and values. Representing various periods in regional history, various cultural groups, various values, the books in this theme highlight the variety of ways that humans may respond to the challenging landscape of Idaho and the northern Intermountain West.

*Developed by Susan Swetnam, Professor of English, Idaho State University (1995)*

## Book List

1. *Balsamroot: A Memoir* by Mary Clearman Blew
2. *Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter* by Janet Campbell Hale
3. *Buffalo Coat* by Carol Ryrie Brink
4. *Heart of a Western Woman* by Leslie Leek
5. *Hole in the Sky* by William Kittredge
6. *Home Below Hell's Canyon* by Grace Jordan
7. *Honey in the Horn* by H. L. Davis
8. *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson
9. *Journal of a Trapper* Osborne Russell
10. *Letters of a Woman Homesteader* by Elinore Pruitt Stewart
11. *Lives of the Saints in Southeast Idaho* by Susan H. Swetnam

12. *Lochsa Road* by Kim Stafford
13. *Myths of the Idaho Indians* by Deward Walker, Jr.
14. *Passages West: Nineteen Stories of Youth and Identity* by Hugh Nichols
15. *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams
16. *Sheep May Safely Graze* by Louie Attebery
17. *Stories That Make the World* by Rodney Frey
18. *Stump Ranch Pioneer* by Nelle Portrey Davis
19. *Sweet Promised Land* by Robert Laxalt
20. *Thousand Pieces of Gold* by Ruthanne Lum McCumm
21. *We Sagebrush Folks* by Annie Pike Greenwood
22. *Where the Morning Light's Still Blue: Personal Essays About Idaho* ed. by William Studebaker and Rick Arding

# BOOK SUMMARIES AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Balsamroot: A Memoir

In this memoir, Mary Clearman Blew traces the interlocked lives of three generations of women in the same family: Mary Blew (who now lives in Moscow, Idaho), her Aunt Imogene and mother Doris (who grew up on a failed Montana homestead), and her daughters Elizabeth and Rachel. After a life of apparent independent happiness, “Auntie” comes to live near Blew and soon begins to decline, bringing Blew to explore past lives of women in her family and to face her own longings and her own assumptions about what makes a woman’s life satisfying and full.

## Author Information

Mary Clearman Blew teaches English at the University of Idaho. She grew up in Montana and is the author of two collections of short stories in addition to *All But the Waltz* (which won the 1992 Pacific Northwest Booksellers Association Award), *Jackalope Dreams*, and *Balsamroot*. She co-edited *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Western Women Writers*.

## Discussion Questions for Balsamroot

1. Blew shares with us a story, “Grandsir,” that her aunt wrote (64-66). What lessons on aging are in this story?
2. “Auntie and I are locked in mortal combat for our lives.” (76). Discuss. What are the terms of the conflict? How is it eventually resolved?
3. How revealing is the author’s observation that her aunt, even in her dementia “longs for just what I secretly long for: to love and be loved”? (73)
4. At least twice (4, 61) we hear the unwritten code: “never speak aloud of what you feel deeply.” This code relates to a family trait of “distance” (136) – a lack of physical touching or display of affection. How do these traits relate to Imogene’s life story and to Blew’s internal struggles? Does the experience of aging (or confronting the problems of aging) in any way help Blew in her relationship with Elizabeth?
5. What function do Imogene’s diaries serve in the novel for the reader? For the narrator?
6. Imogene kept herself busy, always the aunt on the fringes of family. On page 192, Blew writes of Imogene’s “fear of being alone—the fear of annihilation” in connection with the way she lived her life. Comment on this idea.
7. On page 203, Blew writes “Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned—for years I would have disagreed with Yets, believed that the only heart worth having was the heart that came as a gift.” How does this sentiment tie into Imogene’s life? Into Blew’s life?
8. Blew puts together fragments from the diaries to construct the story of Imogene and Lud. What does that narrative tell us about Imogene’s life which Blew had not known? Does this knowledge bring wisdom to Blew?
9. How does Pete Daniels fit into this narrative?
10. In what way is the lowering of the Snake River in 1992 relevant to the narrative Blew is shaping for us?
11. In what ways is the horseback ride of the final chapter a fitting conclusion?

## Bloodlines: Odyssey of a Native Daughter

Janet Campbell Hale's collection of autobiographical essays reflects on her youth as a member of a poor, troubled Indian family and on connections between her own identity and Indian culture and history. Lyrical, angry, caught up in the process of writing and self-creation, Hale explores what it means to her to be an Indian in contemporary America.

Although an occasional concern appeared regarding matters of historical accuracy, reviews of *Bloodlines* were almost unanimously enthusiastic. "A remarkable tale of fortitude," wrote Donna Seaman of what she described as "eight brooding but brave essays." Sherry L. Smith, writing in *Journal of American History*, called it "a depressing book," but also "an important book," and while she pointed out a historical error, she stressed that *Bloodlines* is not primarily history, but "a forceful, intensely personal statement of an Indian woman's attempt to reconcile a difficult past with an ambiguous future." *Bloodlines* won an American Book Award in 1994.

## Author Information

Janet Campbell Hale, born in 1947, is a member of the Coeur d'Alene tribe. Growing up on reservations and in cities around the Northwest, she dropped out of high school by age fifteen, her efforts at finishing school having been disrupted by her transient family. She married at age 18, had a son, and was divorced within year. As a struggling single mother, she attended City College of San Francisco and procured scholarships and financial aid that helped her earn her B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley. In 1970 she married Stephen Dinsmore Hale and gave birth to their daughter Jennifer. She received her M.A. in English from UC Davis in 1984 and the following year published her highly acclaimed novel, *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*. She has taught at several colleges and universities as a writer-in-residence and visiting professor, including appointments as the Richard Thompson Lecturer at Iowa State University in Ames in 1986, the Claremont Lecturer at College of Illinois in Springfield in 1995, and the Visiting Professor of Native America Literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz in 1998. She has published several books of poems, short fiction, several works for children, and two novels. She currently lives in the reservation town of De Smet, Idaho.

## Discussion Questions for *Bloodlines*

1. What do you make of the subtitle “The Odyssey of a Native Daughter?” What are the features of Hale’s odyssey?
2. Discuss the notion of home in *Bloodlines*.
3. Do you find the conclusion to this memoir to be satisfying? And if not, what do you make of it?
4. Hale’s writing has been described as using nonlinear treatment of time. For example, she writes about her terrible childhood with her alcoholic father and unfair, bitter, and cynical mother, followed by affectionate memories of the reconciliation scene in the hospital at her mother’s deathbed in “Daughter of Winter.” She’s middle-aged then but 19 in the next essay, then a good deal older thereafter. Do you read this as exemplifying awkward composition, or as representing a different way of looking at life and the world?
5. Did the jump from childhood to post-college leave too much out of her memoir or was it okay since Hale states, “I’m in fact doing this [writing] for therapeutic, not artistic reasons” (5)? Or do you buy that premise at all? After all, by the time she wrote this book, she’d had two other books published, and her novel *The Jailing of Cecilia Capture* (1985) was highly regarded. How would this sometimes depressing book serve any therapeutic purpose?
6. Hale says she was “torn between writing a novel that was true to my own vision and one that presented a positive image of Indian people” (xxii). What, if anything, does a writer “owe” to his or her people, whether one perceives that as family, ethnic group, or nationality? Is it all too easy to answer “nothing—the writer owes it only to herself to write the truth as she sees it”? This does reach to the very real problem of audience. For whom, other than herself, is Janet Campbell Hale writing here? Do you suppose many Coeur d’Alene have read this book? Or have admired it? Some reviewers have described Hale in *Bloodlines* as a “strong independent woman” who emerges successfully from her struggles with a dysfunctional family. Do you agree?
7. Do you think Hale’s suffering inflicted by her own family was more traumatic than the racism she faced from white/Anglo society? In *Bloodlines*, Hale does not represent a conventional mother-daughter relationship, yet there are some signs of the bond between the two. Discuss this.
8. Hale claims that when autobiography is used as “a basis for fiction,” as in her novel, *The Jailing of Cecelia Capture*, “a rearrangement, a transformation must occur” (12) and in fiction “Real life comes into play only insofar as it can serve the purpose of art” (15). This might be worth reflecting upon in its own right, but what about the matter of “transformation” when it comes to autobiography or memoir? Do we as readers expect it—even demand it? And does it happen here? Do we tend to expect or even demand reconciliation at the end of such writings?
9. Do “all families have a scapegoat” as Hale declares on pp. 74-5, where she uses some form of that work no fewer than 8 times in 20 lines of text? Does your family have a “scapegoat”? *Should* it?

## **Buffalo Coat**

Buffalo Coat is Carol Ryrie Brink's novelized account of events in Moscow, Idaho, around the turn of the century. Brink's work details the yearning lives of women and men who feel not quite in tune with their town's spirit, as it traces the rivalries of several town doctors and their visions of life. It poses man as the instigator against women as the sustainer. While men build to deify themselves, the women work together to provide the basic necessities to all as the need arises. When year after year typhoid cuts a deadly swath through the community, a water and sewer system is proposed to the voters. The main character, a doctor, opposes it because the idea came from a rival doctor and the tax liability on his extensive real estate holdings would prove burdensome. A young woman, barely out of high school, takes up the cause and campaigns to all who will listen. The women of the community, not yet allowed to vote, succeed in influencing the male population to do the right thing and eradicate the deadly disease. Historic fiction of this kind seeks to instruct and enlighten in a subtle fashion as it entertains. The deeper issues facing society become the scenery surrounding the characters as they waltz through their lives. It has an added depth because it has roots in the lives and experiences of real people recently and intimately known to the author.

## **Author Information**

Carol Ryrie Brink (1895-1981) was born in Moscow, Idaho, the child of one of the families whose history is adapted in Buffalo Coat. An author of many children's books, including the Newbery Medal-winning Caddie Woodlawn, she also wrote an Idaho trilogy for adults, Buffalo Coat, Strangers in the Forest, and Snow in the River. After the deaths of both her father and her mother, she was raised by a grandmother who shared her love of storytelling with her. She received her B.A. Degree in 1918 from the University of California-Berkeley, then married her longtime friend, University of Idaho math professor Raymond Brink. They lived for forty years in Minnesota and had one son and one daughter. According to her biographer, Mary Reed, Carol Brink "stroved to live in a way that would not harm others, to never waste a day, and to make the most of her life."

## **Discussion Questions for Buffalo Coat**

## Faraway Places

Tom Spanbauer's western gothic novel may remind some readers of William Faulkner. Set on a farm north of Pocatello, it tells of a boy's sudden coming of age in a violent summer of racial prejudice, drought, corruption, and family turmoil. Thirteen-year-old Jake Weber witnesses the brutal murder of a Native American woman by the town banker. Jake's parents forbid him to speak of the killing or name its perpetrator, even as the woman's African American lover stands falsely accused. The crime and what follows it forever alter Jake's view of his parents and the world around him. *Faraway Places* won widespread praise for its vivid narrative and incantatory style, and Spanbauer displays singular skill in inhabiting the mind of a troubled adolescent boy. Tom Spanbauer, who grew up in Idaho, is the author of two novels and lives in Portland, Oregon, and New York City.

## Author Information

Tom Spanbauer is a critically acclaimed author and the founder of Dangerous Writing. As a writer he has explored issues of race, of sexual identity, of how we make a family for ourselves in order to surmount the limitations of the families into which we are born.

His three published novels *Faraway Places*, *The Man Who Fell In Love With The Moon*, and *In The City Of Shy Hunters*, and soon to be published (May 15, Houghton Mifflin pub.) *NOW IS THE HOUR*, are notable for their combination of a fresh and lyrical prose style with solid storytelling.

As a teacher his innovative approach combines close attention to language with a large-hearted openness to what he calls 'the sore place'--that place within each of us that is the source for stories that no one else can tell. His introductory workshop is an underground legend among emerging writers in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The community of writers that has formed around him is dedicated to the proposition that "Fiction is the lie that tells the truth truer."

Tom lives, writes, and teaches in Portland Oregon.

## Discussion Questions for Faraway Places

1. In an interview, Spanbauer said, "It is just the way life is that there is darkness and there is light. So many artists, I think, make the mistake of either trying to create an upbeat message or a nihilistic one. An artist doesn't really have to try for either because if he looks closely at his world, he will find great tragedy and great ecstasy standing right next to each other." What is the darkness in *Faraway Places*? What is the light?
2. In what way does this novel reflect a "tough paradise"?

## Heart of a Western Woman

*Heart of a Western Woman* is a collection of ten stories by Leslie Leek, set in the eastern Idaho mountains and high desert country. The stories tell of independent women who derive identity and strength from the land and from each other. They are often heroic in the face of loneliness, the death of loved ones, or misunderstandings with the men in their lives.

### Author Information

Leslie Leek was born in Idaho and raised in Dubois and McCammon. She teaches Speech and Theater at Idaho State University.

### Discussion Questions for Heart of a Western Woman

1. Leslie Leek is an Idaho native, and so she may speak from the position of a “western woman.” What are the qualities of a western woman and how do they differ from other geographical women?
2. *Spring Thaw* is a story concerning dreams and hopes, growing apart, and perhaps together again. In the end, when Jill goes to Carl (p. 15), she cannot clearly answer why she wishes to be close. What struggles has she faced in this story? Are they resolved in her mind?
3. In *The Tetons*, how does the protagonist, Claudette, see the mountains? What do they represent to her? In what ways might this story be an extension of the themes in *Spring Thaw*?
4. In *Widows*, the death of Marilyn’s husband Sam is a catalyst for this analysis of the ways women (as shown in Cid, Crystal, Helen, and Marilyn) deal with loss and community. Comment on each.
5. *Long Ride On a Good Mare* is about leaving. Marna Sue prepares for her departure for some time (p. 33). Why did it take her so long? What will she do now?
6. *Molly’s Nipple* is a story about independence and growth. Comment on these elements.
7. *The Naming* is a sort of mystical essay. What are the elements of mysticism here? What role does woman’s intuition or “earth power” play in relation to medical science? What words does Chris chant? What do they mean?
8. The title story, *Heart of a Western Woman*, shows Carly as invigorated by the wilderness and by nature; yet Taylor, the man she has followed, seems closed up by it, driven mad even. On page 50, Leek writes, “Now, Carly was attracted to his talk. It was somehow a compliment to her so she fell in love with him.” Discuss this idea.
9. Discuss Fern’s “madness” in *A Poem For Fern*. What is it that drove her “mad”? Is she cured? Is she independent?
10. In *Cut Beads*, the characters are Native Americans. Does this story feel different from the others? How?
11. *Birch Creek* contains a character named Benny, a woman of old but indeterminate age who evinces certain qualities. What are some of these qualities? What role does she play in this story? What sort of place is Birch Creek?

## Hole in the Sky

*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 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, and the Pacific Northwest Bookseller's Award for Excellence, and the Neil Simon Award for his work on the film *Heartland*.

### Discussion Questions for *Hole in the Sky*

1. What do you think Kittredge means at the end of the opening chapter "Falling," when he says he wants to tell stories that are "useful"? (That is, he wants this book to be "useful.") Do you find his stories in this memoir to be "useful"? Or were they just useful to him, but not necessarily to us as readers?
2. It has been suggested that Kittredge and many other contemporary western writers, like Ivan Doig and Mary Clearman Blew, are attempting to create a "new mythology" for the West. An appropriate jingle might go something like this: Old West, New West, False West, True West. What are the myths of the Old West (often connected with Hollywood and the novels of writers like Louis L'Amour)? To what extent does Kittredge spell out the values of the New West in this memoir, either explicitly or implicitly?
3. "We want to own everything," Kittredge complains (66). Is property the problem? Are we due for a change in thinking about land ownership?
4. In the best memoirs, the writers take risks, particularly with how they present (or represent) themselves. To what extent does Kittredge do that in *Hole in the Sky*? Does he alienate himself from you as a reader in the process? If so, where or how? Another way of looking at this might be to say, "I really dislike the way Kittredge did/said/wrote X."
5. Late in the memoir Kittredge reflects on what he calls his "breakdown" (178), but he doesn't elaborate all that much. What do you make of it? Can you detect the sources of it? What, presumably, is the cure for it?

## Home Below Hell's Canyon

This is an autobiographical account by Grace Jordan, describing the Jordan family's life on a remote sheep ranch in the 1930's in the Snake River Canyon south of Lewiston. With hard work, determination to live a simple, family-centered life, common sense, and good humor, family members adapt to and come to love their new, tough environment and discover strengths in themselves they never knew existed.

### Author Information

Jordan was born in Wasco, Oregon, on April 16, 1892, the daughter of a country doctor and a school teacher. She received a Bachelor of Arts degree with honors in English from the University of Oregon. Grace Jordan worked as a journalist and taught writing at the Universities of Oregon and Washington. She married Len B. Jordan in 1924; he became Governor of Idaho in 1951. Jordan was a consistent free-lance journalist, created poetry, and wrote books based in Idaho, capturing the culture and history of the Idaho landscape.

### Discussion Questions for Home Below Hell's Canyon

1. What are some of the hardships the Jordan family had to endure? How successful were they in conquering these challenges?
2. Did Jordan consider her ranch a "paradise," tough or otherwise? Why or why not? How would you characterize the ranch?
3. In an essay written for the theme, scholar Susan Swetnam writes: "...the narratives show just how intimately human perception of place is colored by the values and attitudes of the perceiver suggesting that, at least in part, we come to love places that we define as ours because they tell us things about ourselves that we want to believe." Discuss what you believe the land meant to Grace Jordan in this context.
4. What themes recur throughout this book: practicality, being productive, frugality, self-reliance, focus on education?
5. What does the author have to say about the role of and importance of women in the canyon?
6. Discuss the different writing styles or tones in this book, from the concrete and journalistic to poetic in her descriptive language. (Example: opening lines of Ch. 2, and language describing riding out in winter, p. 197).
7. People in the canyon met the world with frankness and practicality. Do you think it was characteristic of those lean times? Of isolated life in the canyon?
8. Are there particular images, characters or events that impressed you that we haven't discussed?
9. Are there passages, facts or descriptions that you found especially compelling?

## Honey in the Horn

This Pulitzer Prize winning novel by H. L. Davis tells of the lives of Oregon pioneers. With realistic and colorful detail and rough humor, the work describes the quirky individuality and essential isolation of various frontier types of men and women, as it describes the search for a suspected murderer and the yearning relationship between a young man and a gypsy-like horse seller's daughter. The book offended a lot of Oregonians; he left Oregon but continued to write about the land he knew.

## Author Information

H. L. Davis was born in Yoncalla, Oregon, in 1896 and died in 1960. The son of a school teacher, he held many odd jobs as a youngster and later briefly attended Stanford University in 1916-17. He joined the U.S. Cavalry and served at the Mexican border before settling into writing poetry and short stories.

## Discussion Questions for Honey in the Horn

1. What are the themes of *Honey in the Horn*?
2. Did this book change your vision/image of the American pioneer? How?
3. Would you agree that this book is a mixture of humor and tragedy? Why?
4. Though a novel, could it just as easily be called a history book?
5. What feeling(s) did you take away or lessons did you learn from reading *Honey in the Horn*?
6. How would you rank H.L. David and *Honey in the Horn* with works of other Pulitzer prize winners of his time such as Hemingway, A.B. Guthrie, Wm. Faulkner, and Steinbeck, or even Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the book to which *Honey in the Horn* is most often compared?

## Housekeeping

Marilynne Robinson's best-selling novel, tells the story of two girls orphaned when their mother drives a car off a hill into Lake Fingerbone. The girls move into their grandmother's house where the grandmother, and upon her death, two great aunts, try to shelter the girls and assemble an ordinary life for them out of the daily tasks of housekeeping and the taken-for-granted connections among relatives. But when the great aunts too die, the girls are left in the care of, Sylvie, their mother's transient sister. Sylvie's world means random meals, leaves blowing through the littered rooms of the once orderly house, the parlor filled with heaps of tin cans and old paper. Without a traditional family structure for stability, the girls try to keep their balance between Sylvie's world and the more conventional world of the small community of Fingerbone. Close at first, each sister must finally make her individual choice between those worlds, "outside" or "inside." Robinson makes us understand loneliness, wildness, and the impermanence of both relationships and material objects. Yet she also shows us that these qualities, usually seen as wholly negative, have their own beauty and value. Sylvie and Ruth, the central characters, take their dangerous night walk across the railroad trestle above Lake Fingerbone, an act of courage and delicate balance, into their chosen home, a world stripped down to its essentials of change and motion.

## Author Information

Marilynne Robinson, who lives in Massachusetts, spent childhood summers with her grandparents in Coeur d'Alene and received her Ph.D. from the University of Washington. This 1982 novel, her first, won the Ernest Hemingway Foundation award and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize.

## Discussion Questions for Housekeeping

1. Until recently, literature has been more likely to focus on male experience than on female experience. *Housekeeping* is a novel which really has no male characters. Does that make a difference? You might compare it to such novels of male experience as *The Red Badge of Courage* or *Moby Dick*.
2. Commentators frequently describe the male quest as a horizontal one: Odysseus wants to get home; the knights want to find the Holy Grail; homesteaders want to find land; 49ers want to find gold; Huck Finn and Deerslayer want to avoid civilization. Such horizontal quests involve traveling from one place to another. Recently, commentator Carol Christ has suggested that the female quest is vertical, involving not travel from one place to another, but diving deep into the self in order to understand the individual's relation to society. Does either of these quest patterns fit *Housekeeping*?
3. Much of the western experience involves striving to establish homes and put down roots—as Polly Bemis and Annie Pike Greenwood tried to do. Idaho was a tough paradise, promising great rewards but demanding great endurance, and there are ironies in Sylvie and Ruth's abandonment of the paradise which earlier Idahoans worked so hard to achieve. How is their rejection of housekeeping related to the earlier homesteading effort? Have times changed, or are these simply different personalities?
4. Robinson's style is lyrical and carefully crafted. At the end, for example, when Ruth has accepted transience, the prose becomes both mystical and mythic, stylistically separating itself from the mundane, earthbound, "realistic" world which Ruth has given up. What other aspects of style do you notice?
5. This novel is rich with Biblical imagery. Fire and flood are important; Cain and Abel are mentioned; Ruth's grandmother tries to determine "how nearly the state of grace resembled the state of Idaho." How do such images affect the novel?
6. What is the relationship between humor and seriousness in this novel?
7. A major theme of *Housekeeping* is the relationship between permanence and transience. Even things and people which seem to have passed away are not entirely gone. Just beneath the surface of Lake Fingerbone float the faces of the drowned. In the breezes of abandoned homesteads can be heard the voices of children. What does the novel suggest about the relationship between impermanence and renewal and resurrection?
8. Is this an "Idaho novel" at all? Is the Idaho setting (the state is mentioned by name only once in the novel) crucial or even important? What does the novel suggest about the relationship between place and character?

## **Journal of a Trapper**

*Journal of a Trapper* recounts Osborne Russell's travels in southeastern Idaho, northern Utah, and western Wyoming between 1834 and 1843 as a trapper with Nathaniel Wyeth, Jim Bridger, and independently. With an observant, "factual" eye colored by the assumptions of his calling, Russell records what the country was like before Eastern settlers arrived: its geography and difficulty of travel, its plants and animals, its weather, its native people.

## **Author Information**

Osborne Russell was born in Maine in 1814 and came west with Nathaniel Wyeth's company in 1834. He signed on with Jim Bridger in late 1835, and kept a journal of his life as a trapper into 1843, when he left the Rockies for the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Although his formal schooling was slight, he appears to have read a good bit both in scientific subjects and literature, and he studied law once he got to Oregon, where he became a judge. He spent nine years roaming the northern Intermountain West in search of game. He left the life of a mountain man to settle in Oregon, where he briefly held public office, then went to California in 1849 in search of gold. He never married. Russell fell out with his family around 1855, partly over the publication of his journal, which did not occur in his lifetime (not until 1955, in fact). His health was impaired following an explosion that cost him sight of one eye. He died in 1892 at age 78.

## Discussion Questions for Journal of a Trapper

1. Very early in his journal Russell calls the Caw or Kansas Indians “the most filthy indolent and degraded set of human beings I ever saw.” This sentiment is *not* at all “politically correct” these days. Frequently in the book he refers to Indians as “savages.” What, if anything, saves this journal from censure for being racist? The other major tribes he encounters are the Snake (Shoshone), Blackfeet, and Crow. How do they come off in his account?
2. Also early in his journal, Russell gives us some observations on sites in present-day Idaho, namely Soda Springs and Fort Hall (vicinity of Pocatello). How important are such accounts, along with descriptions like that of Jackson’s Hole (18), to your enjoyment of the book? My point here is that Russell is *not*, generally, a particularly vivid writer, not famous for his imagery and all. Does the book acquire appeal because you’ve visited some of the sites?
3. Russell’s account of his first attempt to kill a buffalo is pretty humorous (5), but he redeems himself when he confronts a grizzly (6). Where else do we find evidence of Russell’s sense of humor? Is it a significant feature of the book? What about his feats of courage, as in the Indian attack (16-17)? What *is* the appeal of this book?
4. The great British poets Russell might have read (he seems to have had some poetic aspirations, and note his “literary moments” on pp. 43, 45-6) would have been Byron, Shelley, and Keats (all dead by 1824); Longfellow was the big name in American poetry, along with William Cullen Bryant. As a boy, Russell might have read Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle,” which was published when he was five years old; James Fenimore Cooper’s “The Deerslayer” appeared in 1841. Perhaps this accounts for certain Romantic (with a capital R) moments in the journal, like those on pp. 27, 58 and elsewhere. Do you think Romanticism is an important aspect of Russell’s character or personality, or not? Does he see himself as “different” from his more rough-hewn companions (63)?
5. It could be argued that Russell misses many good opportunities for developing episodes (note pp. 15, 28). What are his best, most fully developed episodes? Consider encounters with Blackfeet (pp. 52-54, 86-89), Crow who rob his party and leave them to the elements (pp. 70-76), he and White wounded in Blackfeet attack (pp. 101-108). Of course there are “domestic” moments (pp. 114-116). Where, if anywhere, do you find Russell thoughtful, perceptive, insightful about his experiences?
6. Osborne Russell was by no means a sophisticated writer or profound thinker, so why should we spend our good time reading his book? After all, there are fairly numerous journals of this sort by the likes of Warran Angus Ferris’s *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 1830-1835, and Andrew Garcia’s *Tough Trip Through Paradise*, 1878-1879; or there are such novels as Vardis Fisher’s *Mountain Man* and A. B. Guthrie, Jr.’s *The Big Sky*. Where do you think Russell is at his best as a writer? How does he do, for example, with characterization? Or is it fair to have any expectations along such lines?
7. After rereading his poem at the end of the book (153-54), discuss Russell’s view of nature.
8. There is an underlying culture of trappers or mountain men which is embodied in traits of independence, a code of honor, and a sort of brotherhood. Comment on this culture.
9. In other books (Frederick Manfred’s *Lord Grizzly* and Vardis Fisher’s *Mountain Man*, for instance), “mountain men” are idealized heroes in many ways. What are some traits and qualities of mountain men in this book?
10. Despite the thematic concerns, this journal is Russell’s declared effort to correct misinformation about the life and ways of trappers and the wilderness. Discuss this book as

a record of the times and an attempt, as Russell notes, to correct the flights of fancy of other trapper journalists.

11. Russell allows the reader a glimpse into his life for a space of nine years while he was a “mountain man,” and we know only a little about his life before or after this time. Speculate on his reasons for coming to the West. Why does Russell decide to migrate to the Oregon territory and later the California gold mines? How might his journey represent a “spirit of the times”?

## Letters of a Woman Homesteader

Elinore Pruitt Stewart's letters were written over a five-year period to her former employer. She gives us, in her letters, the life of an "ordinary" woman. While her descriptions of nature and friends and work and food are sensory and ebullient, her prose might best be termed reticent when she is discussing marriage and childbirth. This reticence is common in frontier journals of women. For example, it is a full 3 ½ years after the beginning of her correspondence with Mrs. Coney when Stewart finally confides in her that she has been married for most of that time. The reader senses this reticence, a form of modesty, on Stewart's part, and it gives suspense and piquancy to the reading experience. The weaving together in Stewart's letters of ebullience and reticence, joy and sorrow, optimism and perseverance, makes modern life seem bland indeed

### Author Information

Stewart was born in 1876 in Fort Smith, Arkansas, and raised in Oklahoma. She taught herself to read and write, never being the beneficiary of formal schooling. An orphan at a young age, she raised eight younger siblings. Her marriage to a civil engineer brought her to Kansas; she was widowed four years later, when Jerrine, her daughter, was a month old. The two embarked on an impoverished and nomadic existence, which ultimately yielded this rich and poignant volume of letters. Stewart died in 1933, after a long and happy second marriage and a successful career as rancher.

### Discussion Questions for Letters of a Woman Homesteader

1. This book was not conceived as an autobiography—it began as letters to a friend. In book form, it constitutes an autobiography of a portion of the writer's life. Given these constraints, how would you describe Elinore Stewart's autobiographical mode? For example, what sorts of details of her life does she choose to emphasize? To omit or gloss over? Compare and contrast with the other works you have read in this series.
2. The journey motif shapes many of the chapters. Several types of travel are exemplified: escape to a better life, home-founding, exploration, and journeys within (one's inner life) through reading and contemplation (a quest for knowledge). Discuss the author's various journeys and how they add structure, interest, and mythic quality to her narrative. Compare/contrast with the other works you have read in this series.
3. The author tells stories that portray vividly a number of people whose friendship becomes a joy and support to her. Most important are her female friends, Mrs. Louderer and Mrs. O'Shaughnessy. Describe their roles, as well as the role of Mrs. Coney, to whom Elinore wrote her letters. Then there are other women who play minor but important roles: Sedalia and Regalia, Cora Belle, Molly, the "second" Mormon wife, etc. What do they contribute to the narrative?
4. Although the focus seems to be on female characters, men play important roles too. How does the author present Zebulon Pike, Gavotte, and Clyde Stewart?
5. The author seeks to convince her readers that a woman can "better herself" and succeed as a homesteader. Is she convincing? Consider, too, the social/economic context within which she proposes (and demonstrates) that a woman can succeed as a homesteader.
6. This book is dated in the sense that it deals with a bygone era in our national past. What did you gain from reading this book? What relevance does it have for you?
7. If you could interview the author, what would you ask her?

## Lives of the Saints in Southeast Idaho

*Lives of the Saints in Southeast Idaho: An Introduction to Mormon Pioneer Life Story Writing* is a study of the ways that Mormons tell the life stories of their pioneer experiences in biographies and autobiographies—what they emphasize and omit and organize, how they interpret events, what sort of language they choose. Using many extended direct quotes from an archive of over 6000 pages of original written material by LDS writers, it argues that not only do the works present rich insights into a particular culture in a particular place, but they also deserve to be more widely known because of the enjoyable reading they provide.

### Author Information

Susan H. Swetnam is a retired Professor of English from Idaho State University. She has lived in Idaho since 1979 and is a freelance essayist in addition to her publications in Intermountain West studies. Her book *Books, Bluster and Bounty* was selected as the Idaho Library Association Book of the Year for 2012.

### Discussion Questions for Lives of the Saints

1. What aspects of these life histories are specific to the LDS subculture and which are universal to all types of biographical writing?
2. Do you feel some of the short anecdotal sections are taken out of context? Is that a problem with the thesis of the chapter? Do the short sections adequately represent the larger themes?
3. How would reading this book as a member of the LDS community be different than reading it as an agnostic or a member of a different faith?
4. How did you feel about the organization of the book? Did you feel that the chapters transitioned well?
5. How can reading about this type of writing affect the ways that we think about our own personal histories?
6. Do you already practice genealogy? If so, how can this book inform your own inquiries? If not, do you think it might encourage you to start?

## **Lochsa Road: A Pilgrim in the West**

*Lochsa Road* is a series of linked reflections/narratives, describing Kim Stafford's journey alone at a restless, dark point in his life over Lolo Pass, through Montana, and into Wyoming and Idaho. As he travels, Stafford is open to the whims of road experience, connects to the land he travels, and is spiritually reawakened along his "pilgrimage."

### **Author Information**

Kim Stafford grew up in Oregon, Iowa, Indiana, California, and Alaska, following his parents as they taught and traveled through the West. He has taught ethnographic and environmental writing for many years and has won a Western States Book Award for his work, *Having Everything Right*. He directs the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis and Clark State College. He serves as the Literary Executor for the William Stafford Archive, helping readers and publishers to increase public access to William Stafford's writing. He has worked as an oral historian, letterpress printer, editor, photographer, teacher, and visiting writer at a host of small towns in the Pacific Northwest and at colleges in New York, California, Idaho, Washington, and Oregon.

### **Discussion Questions for Lochsa Road**

## **Myths of the Idaho Indians**

*Myths of the Idaho Indians* is a collection, in prose and narrative form, of stories of the Kutneai, the Kalispel, the Coeur d'Alene, the Nez Perce, the Shoshone, and the Northern Paiute. These stories were originally gathered by ethnologists, anthropologists, and historians and include myths of creation, of coyote tricksters, of birth and death, and of justice. They suggest the rich spiritual and aesthetic life of the tribes.

### **Author Information**

Deward Walker, Jr., Professor of Anthropology at the University of Colorado, Boulder, has published several books on Indian culture in the Intermountain West.

### **Discussion Questions for Myths of the Idaho Indians**

## **Passages West: Nineteen Stories of Youth and Identity**

*Passages West*, edited by Hugh Nichols, is an anthology of nineteen short stories about coming of age in the West. Selections by writers including Ivan Doig, Norman Maclean, Wallace Stegner, Mary Clearman Blew, and Vardis Fisher chronicle the anxieties and joys of young people searching for identity in a distinctive landscape.

### **Author Information**

Hugh Nichols, from 1971 to 1999, was Professor of English and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs at Lewis-Clark State College in Lewiston. He has written about H. L. David, Norman Maclean, Dorothy Johnson, and other Western writers.

### **Discussion Questions for Passages West:**

## Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place

This is an autobiographical account which chronicles a disruptive period in the life of author Terry Tempest Williams. In 1983, several sources of stability and inspiration for Williams were shaken when her mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and her beloved Bear River Bird Refuge was threatened by the rising waters of the Great Salt Lake. Critical of less-than-sensitive responses to the land, Williams finds her own peace as she comes to embrace continuity in change, both in the land of her LDS ancestors and in rhythms of her family and her own life. She closes the book from a position of strength, confronting a tradition of acceptance which she now recognizes has various qualities.

### Author Information

Terry Tempest Williams was born in 1955 and grew up within sight of the Great Salt Lake. Her writing reflects her intimate relationship with the natural world. She is author of several books, has served as Naturalist-in-Residence at the Utah Museum of Natural History in Salt Lake City, and as Shirley Sutton Thomas Visiting Professor of English at the University of Utah. Her books include *Pieces of a White Shell*, which won the Southwest Book Award; *Coyote's Canyon*, a collection of personal narratives of Utah's desert canyons; *An Unspoken Hunger*; and *Desert Quartet*. Ms. Williams has received a Lannan Literary Fellowship in creative nonfiction along with a Guggenheim Fellowship for 1997.

### Discussion Questions for Refuge

1. In what ways are birds important to this narrative, e.g. in depicting the relationship between narrator and her mother and grandmother, relevance as chapter titles, symbolic roles, etc.?
2. Name several meanings or definitions of "refuge" contained in the narrative. Is there any conclusive definition? Does the author answer her basic question, "How do we find refuge in the midst of change?"
3. What/who are healed in the story, and how? How is healing linked to nature, to religion, to state of mind, to Native American culture, etc.?
4. Terry's mother dies after years of battling cancer. What does she learn from the experience? What does Terry learn? Is Terry's narrative sentimentalized? How is human death linked to death in nature, and Terry's mother's death to the flooding Salt Lake?
5. Would you call this book a feminist document? In what ways are Terry's mother and grandmother Mimi important in her development? What does she learn from them? In what ways does she differ from them?
6. What does Terry gain from her Mormon background? She says she is not an "orthodox" Mormon. What evidence of her unorthodoxy do you see in the book? In what larger sense is the book a description of religious or spiritual experience? What role is played by rituals? By Native American beliefs?
7. How do urban-perceived necessities clash with natural forces when the lake floods? How do people, government, and businesses respond? How does Terry respond to the flooding of her beloved bird refuge? How do the birds respond? What ironies lie in "radiation" and its role in the story? Does the final chapter, The Clan of One-Breasted Women, seem tacked on, or intrinsically linked to the book that precedes it?

## **Sheep May Safely Graze**

Sheep May Safely Graze is a nonfiction account of the work of one third-generation Idaho sheep ranching family. In chronicling the family's traditions and describing the contemporary context in which the family operates, folklorist Louie Attebery addresses larger questions about the continuity and survival of family traditions and provides a vivid account of a vanishing way of life.

## **Author Information**

Louie Attebery is Professor Emeritus at the College of Idaho in Caldwell. An Idaho native, he was an associate editor of *Northwest Folklore* and has many publications on Idaho folklore and literature. He has won the Idaho Library Association medal for the best book on an Idaho subject and the Outstanding Achievement in the Humanities Award from the Idaho Humanities Council.

## **Discussion Questions for Sheep May Safely Graze**

## **Stories That Make the World**

Stories That Make the World: An Introduction to the Oral Literature and Storytelling of the Indian Peoples of the Inland Northwest blends commentary about the traditions and contexts of oral storytelling with poetic transcriptions of tales told by Coeur d'Alene, Nez Perce, Crow, Bitterroot Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille elders. Arguing that oral literature must be understood in terms of its cultural functions and its communal performance, Rodney Frey's book explores and richly illustrates the "aesthetic and spiritual" truth of the stories it contains, while providing some poetic and linguistic guidelines for interpreting such texts.

### **Author Information**

Rodney Frey is an anthropologist who teaches for Lewis-Clark State College and directs the college's Panhandle Area Programs in Coeur d'Alene. He has done research and published articles and books on the Indian peoples of Montana and Idaho and has worked with public schools since 1974.

### **Discussion Questions for Stories That Make the World**

## Stump Ranch Pioneer

Stump Ranch Pioneer is an autobiographical account by Nelle Portrey Davis that chronicles how Davis and her family acquired land in the Idaho panhandle in 1936 after their ranch in eastern Colorado failed in the dustbowl. The book is full of optimism about the value of hard work and simple, homey life, and about Americans' ability to be self-sufficient and neighborly in the face of Depression hardship.

## Author Information

Nelle Portrey Davis was born in Sidney, Nebraska, in 1901. She became an active freelance writer for home and women's magazines and a wife and mother. *Stump Ranch Pioneer* was written at the request of the New York publisher Dodd, Mead, and Company after a sketch about the ranch appeared in the New York Times Magazine. Davis lived in northern Idaho and eastern Washington until her death in 1986.

## Discussion Questions for Stump Ranch Pioneer

1. Why does Davis try so hard to separate her family's migration from the stereotype assigned to "Okies"?
2. What skills and knowledge do the "dust bowlers" bring west that help with their ultimate success in a new environment?
3. Does the book seem to overly romanticize the pioneer experience? Why do you think Davis chose to include so few of the hardships the family faced after they left Colorado?
4. Davis was an educated woman and a published writer when she and her family migrated to Idaho. How did her background influence the family's success?
5. The success of these families is heavily reliant on collaboration – both within the family unit and between neighbors. Is that still as important in rural communities today?
6. Why was the daily mail so important to Davis and her experience in Idaho? Is that something we've lost?
7. Is it important for these types of narratives to be written in modern times? What can we share with future generations?

## Sweet Promised Land

Sweet Promised Land is a memoir describing Basque immigrant Dominique Laxalt's journey, accompanied by his son, back to his homeland after almost fifty years. As the elder Laxalt revisits the scenes of his youth and speaks with relatives about his hard life in America as a shepherd, he comes to recognize that the northern Nevada high desert has become his true home.

## Author Information

Robert Laxalt, born in 1923 to a shepherd father and a teacher mother in Alturas, California, is a long-time scholar of Basque history and culture. He has published novels, articles, and nonfiction books about Basques and about Nevada.

## Discussion Questions for Sweet Promised Land

1. Why does Laxalt's family have a strong bond despite a family structure where the father was away from his wife and children a lot of the time?
2. Pride and ethnic identity are very important to Basque peoples. How did these elements shape Dominique Laxalt's life? What about your own ethnic identity? How does it shape you? How have you transmitted it to your family?
3. Going back home is such a prominent part of this book. Have you ever gone back home or returned to a place you had been away from for a long time? Was your experience similar or dissimilar to Laxalt's? How so?
4. Language is important for immigrants to America. Have you ever been somewhere where you didn't know the language? How did you adapt?
5. What was retirement like for Dominique? Have you ever changed your lifestyle in such a way as to have to rethink your daily comings and goings? What was that like?
6. Laxalt wrote from a unique perspective on the important intersection between the man of the West and his environment. In a letter to his editor at Curtis Brown while working on this book (Jan. '56), he wrote, "My father's story is to me primarily one of country." Would you agree? Where do we find evidence in the book to support this?
7. His brother Paul said he believed Laxalt's "writing spoke not just to Basques but to all sons and daughters of immigrants, to those who love the American West, and to readers who enjoy simple but eloquent writing.
8. Why do you think sons and daughters of immigrants, regardless of nationality, can relate to this story?
9. How well do we come to know Dominique? Talk about his contrasts, from tenderness with newborn lambs (p. 4) to quick temper and eagerness to settle things with his rifle.
10. Where do you see examples of Basque pride?
11. Did his pride help ensnare Dominique into finally making the trip? (He always kept his appointments made for him by others.) P. 33-4 "The reservations have been made...the beginning of it was actually in his eyes."

12. Why do you think Laxalt included the story about the silver dollar to be delivered to someone in Pamplona?
13. What do you take from Dominique's habit of saving new things for later use?
14. In a letter to his editor, Robert Laxalt refers to "...the inherent but accepted cruelty of nature and men" (Jan. '56 letter to his editor at Curtis Brown).
15. Where do we see this attitude toward nature expressed in this book?

## Thousand Pieces of Gold

Thousand Pieces of Gold is a novelized account of the life of Polly Bemis, a Chinese slave girl brought to the Warren mining district of Idaho in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Describing anti-Chinese prejudice in Idaho, the novel also brings to life Polly's courage, hard work, and indomitable spirit as she adapts to life and to love in her new homeland. Polly was born in northern China, but famine forced her father to sell her. She was first sold to a brothel and then to a slave merchant bound for America, and later auctioned to a saloonkeeper. She eventually married a saloonkeeper and miner and struggled for respect and dignity in the early American West.

### Author Information

RuthAnne Lum McCunn was born in 1946, a Eurasian of Chinese and Scottish descent, in San Francisco's Chinatown. She grew up in Hong Kong, where she was educated first in Chinese and then British schools. In 1962 she returned to the U.S. to attend college. Her award-winning books have been translated into eight languages. A former teacher, she currently resides in San Francisco and lectures extensively at universities and community organizations.

### Discussion Questions for Thousand Pieces of Gold

1. RuthAnne Lum McCunn has said that she wants to help readers understand what it is like to be trapped between two cultures. How does this book do that?
2. As Polly grows into her new culture in Idaho, what conflicts remain for her?
3. Does Polly ever escape from being trapped between two cultures into a fulfilling sense of having two cultures on which to draw?
4. How is Polly Bemis' story like pioneer narratives in general? How is it unlike?
5. What does McCunn gain by inventing dialogue for characters in her story?
6. How much actual sense of history does McCunn give her readers? Does the narrative style she has chosen limit her ability to present background?
7. In Chapter 8, Ding says to Lalu, "Don't you understand, you cannot escape your fate?" (p. 77) How does this book embody the debate on predestination vs. determining one's own future?
8. Discuss the various meanings behind the title, "Thousand Pieces of Gold." Do you think it is an appropriate title for this book?
9. Do you think the author presents a realistic portrait of race relations in a small, yet polarized American community? How about the role of women in a largely male community? Discuss how you think it feels to be a minority in a similar situation.
10. During the course of the book did you ever think Lalu fit into the role of a "China doll"? If so, when does her status start to change and what events contribute to her eventual liberation?
11. Does Jim's concern for Lalu match the brief relationship she had with the bandit Ding? How do the two relationships differ?
12. Lalu is told by Charlie that a Chinese person in America cannot own land. Considering Lalu's love of farming and land, does she ever accept this concept? Give examples of her defiance and perseverance.
13. To what degree does Lalu loosen her ties with her Chinese background? Mention some examples from the book.

## We Sagebrush Folks

Annie Pike Greenwood, an educated, cultivated woman, fell in love with the mountains and the light when her family moved to a Carey Act farm on the Twin Falls North Side Project. She was less charmed, though, by the adverse effects of the frontier, especially on women, and *We Sagebrush Folks* frankly tells, sometimes wryly, sometimes with anger, of the costs that hard work, poverty, and distance could exact on human beings.

## Author Information

Annie Pike Greenwood, who grew up as a “gentile” doctor’s daughter in Utah, taught in a one-room school and helped her husband farm until the family lost its land in 1924. She then taught at Idaho Technical Institute in Pocatello and contributed articles to periodicals including the *Atlantic Monthly* and *Colliers*. She died in 1958.

## Discussion Questions for We Sagebrush Folks

1. Westerners and western novelists, from Laura Ingalls Wilder’s *Little House on the Prairie* to Wallace Stegner’s *Angle of Repose* have envisioned women homesteaders as the bearers of civilization. Men homesteaders were daring and restless, battling the earth and the elements and always ready to move on in search of fresh opportunities. Women, in contrast, sought to put down roots and endure. They built homes, passed the rudiments of education and civilization on to their children, pushed for churches and schools, and guarded their complexions from the harsh western sun. To what extent do the Greenwoods fit this stereotypical pattern?
2. Minidoka homesteaders battled with nature, seeking to subdue and control it: they replaced sagebrush with cash crops, worked to bring water where no rain fell, exterminated rabbits. In order to create paradise, they had to be tough enough to survive adversity, much of it natural adversity. This adversarial relationship with nature often persists in contemporary Idaho, leading some to fear that our efforts to exploit nature for our benefit will end by destroying the state. Some suggest replacing the battle image of man vs. nature with a metaphor emphasizing cooperation between man and nature. How does *We Sagebrush Folks* help to illuminate the ongoing effort to achieve a balanced relationship between man and nature?
3. This book is filled with wonderful, forgotten details from homesteaders’ lives—the fact that farm women sometimes used schools as day care centers, for example, or the incredible joys of a community’s first ice cream machine. What are some other such details, and how do they enrich our understanding of the homesteaders’ experience?
4. How would this work have been different if it had been written as a daily diary?
5. How essential is Greenwood’s education to her perspective?

## **Where the Morning Light's Still Blue**

*Where the Morning Light's Still Blue: Personal Essays About Idaho* is a collection of thirty-five contemporary essays, edited by William Studebaker and Rick Ardinger, which catch a variety of responses and attitudes to the Idaho landscape. Writers from around the state describe their relationships to very particular places and chronicle their inspiration, frustration, love, and sometimes wry reactions. Quite varied in tone and style, the essays chronicle the diversity of writers' voices working in Idaho today.

### **Author Information**

William Studebaker, born in Salmon, Idaho, teaches at the College of Southern Idaho in Twin Falls and is a noted poet, as well as the author of short stories, articles, and books.

Rick Ardinger, Assistant Director of the Idaho Humanities Council, is the editor of several anthologies and publisher of Limberlost Press.

### **Discussion Questions for *Where the Morning Light's Still Blue***

1. What are your favorite essays in this collection? Why?
2. Which essays best capture a "sense of place" for you? Share examples.
3. If you had been asked to contribute to this book, what (or where) would you have written about?