

READER'S GUIDE

Spoilers ahead!

1. How do the Reverend Paul Applewhite (Millie's grandfather) and Jack Reynolds (Millie's father) compare? Are they more alike or different from one another? What characteristics of these two men attract so many admirers (church members and rodeo fans)? Are you more drawn to those who live on the edge of madness, the more eccentric, creative, or wild personalities? Or do more stable personalities demand your attention? Think of famous people in today's society. What is it that makes them so magnetic? What kind of people do you most admire?

2. Throughout her life, Millie is trying to figure out whether or not she really believes in God. Her mother seems to rely on her faith to keep her anchored, singing hymns, praying, telling Bible stories, and quoting Scripture, yet she never takes Millie to church. Millie feels closest to God when she's in nature, and she speaks of the gypsy gathering as "holy." How does Millie's questioning make you consider your own faith? When do you feel closest to God? What do you like or dislike about organized religion and traditions? Have you ever been judged, criticized, ostracized, or punished because of your faith? Have you ever visited a country (or do you live in a country) where religious worship is prohibited? What is the effect?

3. When Millie falls from the tree, she believes that a man catches her and saves her life. She sees this man many times, often when she feels most alone. Do you believe loved ones can watch over us after death? Do you believe in angels? Why do you think Millie's guardian angel came in the form of Sloth rather than as one of her parents? What role did Sloth play in her life?

4. When Millie is just seventeen years old, she faces a choice of loving Bump or River. Do you think she makes the right choice? Do you think women have more options now than Millie did as a disadvantaged orphan girl in the 1940s? Even with more options, do women still tend to determine their life course based on their husband's job and priorities? How does your religious affiliation affect the way you see yourself as a woman? Do you agree or disagree with your church's view of women?

5. Throughout the book, Millie struggles to come to terms with traditional labels of "good" and "bad." Bill Miller is described as a good man, even describing himself with those words as he begins to rape Millie. As a rodeo veterinarian, Bump might be looked down upon by the likes of the upper-class Millers. And Millie was surprised to find River a well-read, well-groomed adventurer, rather than the illiterate, dirty stereotype she thought he'd be. What does Millie learn about the way people are perceived and the truth about who they really are? Do you portray your true self to the public, or do you strive to maintain a perfect image, like the Miller family? What stereotypes or class issues do you struggle to overcome, either in the way you perceive others or in the way you are perceived? How many people know the *real* you?

6. How do you feel about the way Millie handled the situation in the steeple? Have you ever been a victim of sexual, verbal, or physical abuse? How have you learned to take a more active role in your own life in order to prevent further victimization? What would you do differently if you could go back to that moment again? Have you been able to forgive the person(s) who harmed you, and how has that ability or inability to forgive affected you? Likewise, have you ever been the one to inflict harm on another person? If so, take time to evaluate the causes and effects of such events. What can you do to break that cycle?

7. Even though Millie felt so alone most of her life, her life has been filled with lots of people who loved her: Sloth, Miss Harper, Mama. She also develops a special bond with Diana's housekeeper, Mabel, and Diana's daughter, Camille. What do you think about the relationship she builds with each of them? Do you think she'll continue to develop those relationships after she leaves Iti Taloa? What people have helped shape your life? Do you believe people are put into our lives for a reason? What efforts do you make to nourish your friendships?

8. Millie has a complicated relationship with her mother and father, yet she loves them both. What do you value most about your parents or your children? What would you like to improve about your relationship? What steps can you take to build a healthier relationship with them? Likewise, Millie's relationship with her grandparents is beyond strained. How do you see your role as a grandparent or grandchild?

9. Millie leaves town without confronting Bill Miller. She chooses not to let him control one more minute of her life. She tries to leave that history behind her and start her new life with Bump, claiming, “It is finished.” Do you think it’s possible to leave such traumatic events buried deep without ever coming to terms with them? Do you think the events that took place in the steeple will come back to haunt Millie, or is such a clean escape possible? Do you think she should tell Bump about the rape? Do you have secrets that you have kept from those you love? Have you ever wondered what would happen if you told the truth?

10. In the end, Millie reaches a comfortable place with her faith. She comes to believe that a loving God had been there all along, watching over her, allowing her to make her own choices. Do you believe everything is in God’s hands, and that all you need to do is pray (as Millie’s mother does)? Or do you believe God gives you options, and that it’s up to you to correct the negative things that happen to you, all while making your faith the central part of your life?

ADDITIONAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This story ends when Millie is seventeen, the morning after a devastating assault. Millie is still numb and in “survivor” mode when she leaves, and she hasn’t come to terms with the event yet. What do you predict will happen to her?
2. Who is your favorite character in this story? Why? Who is your least favorite character? Why?
3. What is your favorite scene? What scene made you react with the strongest emotions (good or bad)? What scene would you change, and how?
4. Do you think Millie would have left with the rodeo even if Bump hadn’t been with her? Do you think Millie will go to Colorado with Bump or stay with the Cauy Tucker group and compete with Firefly?
5. What do you think will happen to Bill and Diana Miller? Camille? Are you upset that Bill walks away unpunished at the end of the book? Do you think he will suffer consequences in the sequel or do you think some men get away with this kind of behavior, as their victims choose to remain silent, sometimes shamed?

6. What could Millie's mother, Marie, have done differently to create a better life for herself and Millie?

7. What do you think of the symbolism with the mother dog and her pups? Do you know of any women who are willing to sacrifice their own children's safety in order to survive? What do you think of Marie? Millie? And Millie's grandmother, Sarah? Do you see a pattern to the mothering styles of Sarah and Marie? Do you think Millie, if given the chance, will break that pattern?

8. What do you think of the scene in the baptismal pool?

9. How do you like the traveler woman, Babushka? And what do you think about her noticing the shift in Millie from yellow to red?

10. What role do you think Mabel ends up playing in Millie's life?

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Tell us about your experience writing this book. How did Millie find her voice?

When our family moved to Mississippi, I spent some time researching the region. I read about the Rose Hill Cemetery in Meridian, Mississippi, where many Romany travelers have been buried. Our family traveled to see this historic site, and I was especially interested in the tombstone of Queen Kelly (aka Callie) Mitchell. The stories of these travelers vary quite a bit depending on the source, but the idea of travelers sharing this region fascinated me. I began reading everything I could find about travelers in the South and realized that although I had spent my entire childhood in Louisiana, I was completely unaware that travelers shared this land with me. I figured there was more to be learned, so I decided to write a fictional account of the travelers. I planned to fill in all those blanks in recorded history by simply making it up! How fun! So I sat down to write a novel about a Romany woman who traveled across the south during the Great Depression. I still think that would be a fascinating story, but when I sat down to write it, it wasn't the voice of a Romany woman that I heard. Instead, I saw a clear image of a local Mississippi woman. She was obviously depressed, scared, poor, and hopeless. She was standing on her porch watching the group of travelers leaving town. She wanted to leave with them, but she was too afraid to take that first step.

So I sat down to write a novel about this desperate woman who longed to escape her miserable life by leaving town with the “gypsies.” But it wasn’t her voice I heard either. Instead, I heard the voice of a little girl. She was the daughter of the woman on the porch, and she was watching her mother from the limbs of a tree, telling me about her mother, and about the travelers, and about everything she observed in her small Mississippi town. That little girl was named Millie, and *Into the Free* is her story.

What parts of the story were most enjoyable to write? Which were most difficult?

I absolutely loved writing this entire story. It’s always been on my bucket list to write a novel, and once Millie started telling me her story the words flowed seamlessly. Within four months, I had written a book. Sounds easy, right? Not so fast! I was lucky to find a wonderful agent (Greg Johnson) and a fabulous publishing house (David C Cook), but once the contract was signed, I had to wait a long time for the publication date. That was the hardest part for me. I’m not a patient gal.

I guess the other hard part has been letting it go. It’s absolutely terrifying to send this out into the universe. My children are still young and at home with me, but I imagine this is training me for the day they leave the nest.

The editorial phase was a wonderful learning process for me. I have grown so much as an author, and while I hope to improve with every book I write, I certainly feel better equipped to write the next one, thanks in full to the amazing readers and editors who shaped this book into what it is today. If only I could continue improving it.

I don't know that I'd ever get to the point where I could put it down and say, "It's as good as it can be." Maybe I'll experience that with the sequel ... only time will tell.

In particular, I learned a lot about writing historical fiction. I thought I had been diligent in my research, but the extraordinarily talented copy editor Renada Arens worked her magic through this book and taught me to examine each and every word for historical accuracy. I learned so much from her and still find myself looking at every word and wondering when it entered the English language and how it has evolved. She taught me to really travel through time into an era I never got to experience, and it's been a delightful journey.

I'm sure I still got many things wrong and will hear from readers who are much brighter than I am, but I look forward to those comments because that means I'll continue learning long after this project is complete.

Was there an alternate ending?

Yes, the ending has changed many times as I struggled with deciding where to end the book. There's a lot left to Millie's story, but we opted to end *Into the Free* at this point and continue sharing Millie with readers in a sequel. I sure hope you'll come back to find out what happens next!

What do you hope readers remember long after they've finished the book?

I have grown to love Millie. She feels as real to me as the people in my life. It sounds a little hokeypokey, but I really do hope readers

love her as much as I do. In fact, I hope all of my characters make their mark in the minds of readers.

When I read, I love to come away from a book feeling as if I've seen the world from another person's point of view. I want to close that book with a better understanding of opinions that may or may not fall in line with my own. I want to come away with a sense of personal growth.

While it takes a team of finely skilled craftsmen to prepare a book for publication, I still believe literature is a creative art. Like any work of art, each individual will take from it what is needed. That experience should differ for every reader, and I didn't write this book to present any specific moral lesson. I suppose if there is one primary thought I want readers to consider, it's that our choices matter. Every single one of them.

Millie and many other characters love to read. What are some of your favorite books and authors?

This is a tough question for me. It's like asking me to choose my favorite child. It's not possible. I am an avid reader and I enjoy a broad range of authors and genres, so it's difficult for me to narrow it down. However, a few names come to mind consistently. Barbara Kingsolver, Jeannette Walls, Mark Richard, Adriana Trigiani, Brennan Manning, Jon Krakauer, Michael Ondaatje, Wally Lamb, David Sedaris, Harper Lee, Louise Erdrich, Anne Lamott, Astrid Lindgren, Mark Twain, Bruce Machart, Malcolm Gladwell, Sue Monk Kidd, Hillary Jordan, and Dr. Seuss. See? I'm all over the place.

As for a book, my all-time favorite is *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver, followed by *The Samurai's Garden* by Gail

Tsukiyama, and *Little Bee* by Chris Cleave. Sara Gruen's *Water for Elephants* is up there with the best of them, and Jeff Kinney's Diary of a Wimpy Kid series makes me laugh on every page. Of course, I also have to include *Pippi Longstocking* by Astrid Lindgren, and a work of creative nonfiction by River Jordan called *Praying for Strangers*, as well as *Ellen Foster* by Kaye Gibbons.

I also love the American classics *The Catcher in the Rye*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I've read *The Awakening* by Kate Chopin too many times to count, as well as everything by Ann Patchett and Joan Didion. I also love to read Beth Ann Fennelly's works, but hearing her read them is even better. I'll be slain for admitting it, but I loved James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*. Just read it as a novel instead of a memoir and you'll likely appreciate his gift. And I think Suzanne Collins reaches commercial perfection with her Hunger Games series.

I'm a nerd, but I also love to read screenplays, my favorites being *Crash*, *Good Will Hunting*, and *Juno*.

But please don't ask me to analyze characters or quote favorite verses from any of these works I've mentioned. Unlike River's character, I have an awful memory and find each reread as delightful as the first. Just start with Pippi. She's sure to bring smiles to all.

For deleted scenes, playlists, recipes, as well as information about Romany travelers, the Choctaw Nation, and the early American rodeo, visit www.juliecantrell.com.