

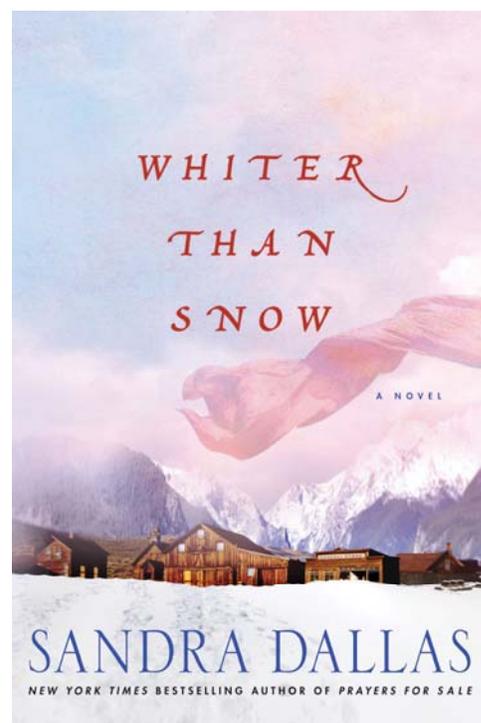


Whiter Than Snow

by Sandra Dallas

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *Whiter Than Snow* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *Whiter Than Snow*.

About the Book

From The New York Times bestselling author of Prayers for Sale comes the moving and powerful story of a small town after a devastating avalanche, and the life changing effects it has on the people who live there

Whiter Than Snow opens in 1920, on a spring afternoon in Swandyke, a small town near Colorado's Tenmile Range. Just moments after four o'clock, a large split of snow separates from Jubilee Mountain high above the tiny hamlet and hurtles down the rocky slope, enveloping everything in its path including nine young children who are walking home from school. But only four children survive. *Whiter Than Snow* takes you into the lives of each of these families: There's Lucy and Dolly Patch—two sisters, long estranged by a shocking betrayal. Joe Cobb, Swandyke's only black resident, whose love for his daughter Jane forces him to flee Alabama. There's Grace Foote, who hides secrets and scandal that belies her genteel façade. And Minder Evans, a civil war veteran who considers his cowardice his greatest sin. Finally, there's Essie Snowball, born Esther Schnable to conservative Jewish parents, but who now works as a prostitute and hides her child's parentage from all the world.

Ultimately, each story serves as an allegory to the greater theme of the novel by echoing that fate, chance, and perhaps even divine providence, are all woven into the fabric of everyday life. And it's through each character's defining moment in his or her past that the reader understands how each child has become its parent's purpose for living. In the end, it's a novel of forgiveness, redemption, survival, faith and family.

Praise for *Sandra Dallas's Prayers for Sale*

"This satisfying novel will immediately draw readers into Hennie and Nit's lives, and the unexpected twists will keep them hooked through to the bittersweet denouement." --Publishers Weekly

"Forgiveness and redemption are the themes of this gentle novel about hardscrabble lives." --*Kirkus Reviews*

"Like the lives narrated, this novel, by the author of *Tallgrass*, runs the gamut of heartache, hardship, and happiness." --*Booklist*

"Her dexterity is evident on every page, and *Prayers for Sale*--an answered prayer for discerning readers - adds to a distinguished body of intelligent, humane and affecting work." --*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

"Dallas is an amazing storyteller with a knack for historical fiction, Colorado's in particular. Her writing is fresh and current even though she writes about the past. Her characters are well-constructed and linger in the mind after the story is finished." --*Denver Post*



About the Author

Sandra Dallas is the author of nine novels, including *Prayers for Sale*, *Tallgrass* and *New Mercies*. She is a former Denver bureau chief for *Business Week* magazine and lives in Denver, Colorado.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does Lucy hate Swandyke, while her sister Dolly loves it? What do the mountains represent to each girl? Why did Lucy miss Dolly more than Ted during the women's estrangement?
2. Emancipation did not end prejudice against African Americans, and in many cases, their treatment was worse after freedom. Compare the lives of men during slavery with Joe's life as a post-Civil War black man. How was it better and worse? When did the attitude toward blacks change, and what brought about that change?

3. Why was Grace so anxious to find a husband after she discovered her family's fortune was gone? Did she have options other than marriage? Compare her life with Jim with what it would have been if she'd married George.
4. Should Minder have tried to save Billy Boy, even though both men would have drowned? Why didn't Minder identify himself to Kate when he encountered her in Fort Madison? Should he have done so?
5. What made Esther more ambitious than her sister? What alternative did she have to becoming a prostitute? Does she have a future in Swandyke? Will the townspeople ever forget she was a hooker?
6. Which character in the book did you relate to most, and why?
7. You knew from the outset that only four of the nine children caught in the avalanche would live. Which ones would you have saved?
8. If an avalanche took place in a small mountain town today, how would the residents' reactions differ from those of the townspeople in Swandyke in 1920? How would they be the same?
9. Why does tragedy bring people together? How did it change the characters in *Whiter Than Snow*? And how does it change people in general?

A Conversation with Sandra Dallas

***Whiter Than Snow* is a different format for you. Why is that?**

SD: I gave a speech in the Northwest once, and the man who introduced me said "I've never read Sandra's books,"—to reassuring boos—"but I'm told each one is different." I'd never considered that, but as I thought about it, I decided I liked the comment. There are many similarities in my books, of course, even down to recycled characters. But the books are written in different formats. *The Diary of Mattie Spenser* is in diary form, while *Alice's Tulips* is a series of letters. *Prayers for Sale* is almost a collection of short stories. I've written in both first and third person. So in *Whiter Than Snow*, I wrote the book by using life stories told from the viewpoints of five different persons. Perhaps because I like making each book different, I've never written a series.

Are you one of the characters in the book?

SD: No. I suspect there is a part of me in all my female characters, the bad ones as well as the good ones, but I have never based a character on myself or on anybody else, with one exception—the father, Loyal Stroud, in *Tallgrass*. As I wrote that book, I realized Loyal had become my own father, and as a result, he emerged as a far more important character than I'd planned. But I didn't pattern him after my dad on purpose; it just happened. The character who comes closest to being me is Mattie in *The Diary of Mattie Spenser*. We have the same birthday, are the same height, and she has my sense of humor. But she's nicer and has better hair. The characters in *Whiter Than Snow* are not based on any individuals, but they represent the generous, caring people I knew in the mining towns some 50 years ago. I do give my characters good and bad

characteristics of people I know, however. One of the neat things with writing fiction is you can get even with people.

Do you outline your books before you write them?

SD: I never have. I know the beginning and the end, and the rest of the novel happens as I write it. I was taught to have a dossier on each character before writing a book, but that doesn't work for me. I don't know why I'd create a character to a set of specifications. The character reveals herself as I write, and as she learns to trust me, she tells me her secrets. This sounds coy, but I learn so much about the character as I sit at my computer. Sometimes I'm astonished at the things she tells me. I want to give my characters a chance to tell their stories, and I couldn't do that if I worked from an outline.

You mention a computer, is that how you write?

SD: It would make a nice story to say I write on a yellow legal pad in a bar, as some writers do. But the fact is, I have an office home and a computer. I couldn't write in longhand or even on a typewriter anymore. I keep regular office hours and write every day. To paraphrase Woody Allen, 90 pct. of writing is being there.

You live in Colorado. Do you know the mountains, and is there really a Swandyke?

SD: I moved to Breckenridge, Colo., as a bride in 1963, and had a house there for nearly 40 years. I got to know the old people who had worked in the mines and on the gold dredges. And I learned to both love and hate the mountains. Later, I worked for *Business Week*, where I specialized in hard-rock mining, so I learned about mining methods. At the same time, I wrote books on Colorado history.

Yes, there is a Swandyke on the Swan River not far from Breckenridge. It's a ghost town now. I used the name, but the town itself was much different from the one in *Whiter Than Snow*.

Essay

The ideas for most of my books come with a sort of flash of "inspiration," if I can call it that, what James Michener termed "the magical moment." But in the case of *Whiter Than Snow*, I can't tell you when the idea hit me. I'm not sure what triggered the book. All I know is I was at a Western Writers of America convention in Scottsdale, Ariz., in June, 2008, and heard a well-known writer remark that a plot was a group of unrelated people coming together to face a common danger. Why that comment, on a day where the temperature was over 100 degrees, led to a book about an avalanche high in the Colorado Rockies is unclear. All I know is that later on, I became aware that I was going to write a book about a snowslide.

Writing *Whiter Than Snow* was a joy to write, because it incorporates so many things that interest me personally. Each of the chapters involves subjects I wanted to explore:

The chapter on Lucy and Dolly, for instance, is about connections between women, in this case sisters. I suppose I wanted to elaborate on that because my sister Mary and I are so close. And it is about the love-hate relationships people have with where they live. Place has always been a character in my books. In *Whiter Than Snow*, it is the harsh Colorado mountains where I once lived.

In the past few years, I've read a great deal about the post-Civil War treatment of African Americans, and was stunned to learn that in some cases, treatment of blacks was worse after

emancipation. Slaves had an economic value, so while their treatment of slaves was often brutal, their owners had an economic reason to keep them alive. That disappeared with emancipation, so freedom, as Joe and his family knew, was as fraught with danger as slavery had been.

I've never had much sympathy for the problems of the rich, but in Grace's case, her problem was not just being rich and losing her fortune, it was about the lack of options for all women in the early part of the 20th century. As a feminist, I'm well aware of the dearth of opportunities for women, both historically and in my lifetime. When I married in 1963, my credit cards were cancelled and applications sent to my husband. A bank refused to consider my income when my husband and I applied for a home loan. ("You might get pregnant.") I was turned down for jobs because "that's a man's position." I've encountered sexual harassment and job and pay discrimination. So I can relate to Grace's plight.

Incidentally, I set this chapter in Saginaw, Michigan, because it was written just after I gave a speech in Saginaw. I loved the town with its wonderful Victorian mansions.

Years ago, when my husband was in charge of publicity for the Breckenridge Ski Area, he invited the Back Porch Majority, a singing group that was a sort of farm team for the New Christy Minstrels, to ski there. One of the group's songs was about the Sultana, and that's where I first heard about the Mississippi steamboat whose sinking was the greatest maritime disaster in U.S. history. More people were killed in the Sultana tragedy than in the sinking of the Titanic.

My daughter Dana and I visited the Tenement Museum in New York several years ago, and I was intrigued with conditions on the Lower East Side and the structured lives of immigrant women. That led to the chapter on Essie Snowball.

Because I was personally interested in so many of the subjects I wrote about in *Whiter Than Snow*, the research was fun. Mostly, I read everything I can find on whatever I'm writing about, but in this case, some of the research came from an unexpected source, my grandson, Forrest Athearn, then age six. He heard I was working on a book about a snowslide, so he wrote me a note entitled "About Avalanches:" "Avalanches start from ckoneses. The wend has to blow it hard and then it forms into a pelo and then it fols down a speshl way. Avalanches omle are on step mowtines. You can die esale. They go fast."

That's about all I needed to know, and it's little wonder, then, that the book is dedicated to Forrest.

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