

BRAVE ENEMIES



A Short Note from the Author

A Reading and Discussion Guide



REACHING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

A Short Note from the Author

Many reviewers and readers have noted that several of my stories and novels are told from the point of view of a woman. They speak as though it is uncommon for men to write from the point of view of women characters. I like to point out that Daniel Defoe published *Moll Flanders* in 1722, one of the earliest English novels, about a woman's life, told in her own voice.

Reynolds Price, who has published several well-known novels narrated by women, says that all men are raised by women and therefore are familiar from infancy with women's voices, women's points of view. One of the models I had in mind when I first wrote from a woman's point of view in my 1992 novella *The Mountains Won't Remember Us* was Thomas Wolfe's story "The Web of Earth," a monologue spoken by his mother.

Modern fiction got started around the time a lot of women in Europe and England learned to read. From the first, novels were written primarily for an audience of women, whether authored by men or women. Fiction is about intimacy, about emotions and relationships, about detail, and often about the powerless and disadvantaged. Prose fiction is almost never heroic, in the older poetic sense. Novels are more often antiheroic; witness *Don Quixote*, *Crime and Punishment*.

It has been a great surprise to me to find myself drawn again and again to write stories about women, told by women. I always expected to write action stories, stories about warfare, wilderness, the frontier, stories about history and panthers, road-building and hunting. And I have written novels about all those things, but the surprise is that they are often narrated by women who happened to be there.

In the late 1980s I decided to write a novel about the battle of Cowpens in the American Revolution. At least one of my ancestors had fought in the battle, January 17, 1781, just down the mountain near Spartanburg. My dad, who loved history, had told me the story of the battle when I was a boy. I began doing research about the Revolutionary War in the Carolinas and found that Tarleton, the British commander who lost the battle, explained that he had ordered his men to fight after marching all night because he had reports the “Green River rifles” were on their way to join the Americans, and he wanted to fight before they arrived. I had grown up on Green River.

I wrote a version of the novel that became *Brave Enemies* in the early 1990s but knew it wasn't right. I knew the battle scenes were accurate but wasn't sure who the people fighting were. It was only years later, when I imagined Josie Summers, the sixteen-year-old who has been violated and is running away from home with no place to go, that the story really came alive for me. Once I heard her voice and began to feel her fear as she wandered into the wilderness, the story began to shape itself.

A writer's imagination is stimulated most by tasks that are difficult. Yeats talked about putting on an anti-mask, an opposite identity, to stretch the imagination and understanding. I think this may be the case with my fiction writing. Assuming the voice, the consciousness of a woman character in trouble, struggling to survive, is so alien, so difficult for me, it calls forth my best energy and discipline. I demand most of myself, for nothing less will work or bring the story into being.

I often say my best talent is for listening. I was the shy kid who sat in the corner while the women strung beans or peeled peaches. I listened to my mother and my aunts talking while the men were away. I became a fiction writer to get down some of the voices I heard by the fireplace or on the porch back then, and to tell the stories I heard about wars, about panthers and snakes and ghosts, about sickness and childbirth in mountain cabins, about the deaths of children.

I believe I write more about women characters than about men because women fascinate me. I am in awe of women, their toughness and vulnerability. I am drawn to stories of the powerless, people who survive in difficult times. I am drawn to stories where physical danger and hunger are real, and to vulnerable characters who can describe the struggles. I learn from my characters as I go, letting them tell their stories to me. They remind me of things I had forgotten I knew.

A READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. What lessons does Josie take away from her mother's marriage to Mr. Griffin? In what ways does her mother's marriage affect her relationship later with John?
2. Discuss Josie's actions leading up to her running away. Were they justified? What other choices could she have made?
3. In what ways is the harassment Josie experiences similar or dissimilar to what young women might encounter today?
4. The novel alternates between Josie's and John's points of view. What effect does this narration have on the way the story unfolds? With which character did you most identify and why?
5. Compare the role of faith in the lives of Josie and John. How does it inform who they are and how they behave?
6. Do you think that John has satisfactorily resolved his moral obligation to his church and his love for Josie? Was it ethical for him to support Josie's deception? And why doesn't he reveal Josie's identity to his parishioners? What exactly does he fear from them?

7. “Sometimes a woman has to be smart and swallow her pride,” Josie confesses. “I decided I would resist the sergeant, but I would not holler out. If he overpowered me I would have to let him have his way. I would not give in, but I would not let him kill me either. The Lord would forgive me” (page 203). In what ways does Josie succeed at being a woman in man’s world? Do you believe women today still need to swallow their pride?
8. In what ways do Josie’s and John’s journeys parallel each other after they’re forced to separate?
9. What drives Josie to not only dress as a boy but also risk her life in battle? How successful do you think Josie is at passing herself off as “one of the boys” in Cox’s militia company?
10. After all John has seen, he comes to a realization: “I had come to believe there was really no right side or wrong side in war. All killing was wrong and all hatred was wrong” (page 274). To what extent do you agree or disagree with this statement? How were you affected by the author’s vivid depiction of the battle scenes?
11. The book opens with the epigraph from Thomas Jefferson: “Whenever hostile aggressions . . . require a resort to war, we must meet our duty and convince the world that we are just friends and brave enemies.” To what degree does that hold true in the Battle of Cowpens?
12. Who do you believe is the real hero of *Brave Enemies*, and why?
13. It has been said that in the best fiction there is no character who is entirely bad and no hero who is entirely good. Does that apply to the characters in *Brave Enemies*? And if so, in what ways?