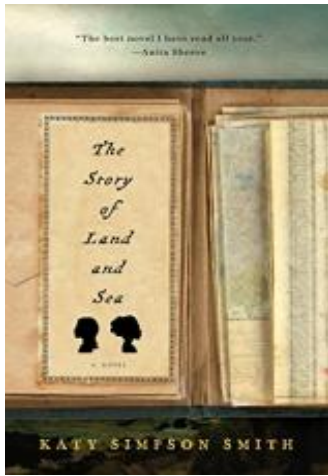


# The Story of Land and Sea

by Katy Simpson Smith

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## About the Book

Set in a small coastal town in North Carolina during the waning years of the American Revolution, this incandescent debut novel follows three generations of family --- fathers and daughters, mother and son, master and slave, characters who yearn for redemption amidst a heady brew of war, kidnapping, slavery and love.

Drawn to the ocean, 10-year-old Tabitha wanders the marshes of her small coastal village and listens to her father's stories about his pirate voyages and the mother she never knew. Since the loss of his wife Helen, John has remained land-bound for their daughter, but when Tab contracts yellow fever, he turns to the sea once more. Desperate to save his daughter, he takes her aboard a sloop bound for Bermuda, hoping the salt air will heal her.

Years before, Helen herself was raised by a widowed father. Asa, the devout owner of a small plantation, gives his daughter a young slave named Moll for her tenth birthday. Left largely on their own, Helen and Moll develop a close but uneasy companionship. Helen gradually takes over the running of the plantation as the girls grow up, but when she meets John, the pirate turned Continental soldier, she flouts convention and her father's wishes by falling in love. Moll, meanwhile, is forced into marriage with a stranger. Her only solace is her son, Davy, whom she will protect with a passion that defies the bounds of slavery.

In this elegant, evocative and haunting debut, Katy Simpson Smith captures the singular love between parent and child, the devastation of love lost and the lonely paths we travel in the name of renewal.

## Discussion Guide

1. THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA is set during and after the Revolutionary War. Of what significance is the historical time and place of the story? How would you describe the town of Beaufort during this period? What are the particular challenges of this time, especially for the lives of the novel's women? How are these challenges demonstrated

in the experiences of Helen, her daughter Tabitha and her slave Moll? How do the lives of these 18th century women compare to those of women today? If you could go back in time and live during that period, would you?

**2.** Husbands lose wives, children lose mothers and a mother loses her child in the novel. How do these losses affect each of them? How do each of the characters seem to cope --- or not --- with his or her grief? Of all the profound experiences of loss and longing in the story, which was the most compelling to you?

**3.** Explain the significance of the title *THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA*. What does the contrast between the land and the sea bring to the novel? What do the sea and the land represent to each of the characters and how is each reflected in their lives?

**4.** Helen's story of land and sea comes in the form of trinkets --- a brass bell, a broken pearl --- she has gathered. Why are these small, everyday items so significant to her? What kind of treasures does her daughter Tabitha collect? Why do we collect objects --- why are they important to us?

**5.** Tabitha, Helen's daughter, identifies the mother she never knew with the ocean. What specific human characteristics are suggested by the many and varied descriptions of the ocean throughout the novel?

**6.** For 10-year-old Tabitha, "the wicked are the heroes." Why? What is it about innocence and youth that might make such characters compelling? How would you describe Tabitha's childhood? In what ways is it unusual? We eventually come to know Tabitha's mother, Helen, as a child. Are mother and daughter alike? How is Tab both her mother's and her father's daughter?

**7.** Part One ends in a tragic event. How does John cope with his losses in order to make a life for himself? How can we as readers also move on from that event? How do some of the characters maintain a sense of hope in their lives?

**8.** Helen is a strong-minded woman, yet she is also a dutiful daughter who loves her father. Asa does not approve of John, yet Helen elopes with him anyway. What gives her the courage to defy her father and follow her heart? How does her sense of duty change over time?

**9.** Consider Helen's slave, Moll, who has been with Helen since both were young girls. Describe her relationship with Helen. Do they think of themselves as friends? Can a slave and a master truly be friends? How does the imbalance in their relationship affect how they see each other and how they experience the ordinary events of life, from marriage to childbirth? Though her life is held in bondage, in what ways does Moll demonstrate her power and independence? Of the two women, does one have more emotional power over the other?

**10.** After John's tragic loss, he decides to head west and takes Moll's son, Davy, with him. Why does he do this? Is he as heartless as Moll accuses him of being? Shouldn't Moll be happy that going west holds the promise of eventual freedom for her son? What fuels her decision to run away, even though she is leaving two young daughters behind? Are you sympathetic to her choices? How does Asa respond to Moll's request for her freedom? Is it possible to sympathize with him?

**11.** Moll believes that "Love was weakness. Love was acknowledging the rightness of the world and this she could not do." Explain this. Why does she feel this way? What role does love play in each of the characters' lives? Is love a form

of bondage or does it offer freedom? In thinking about Moll's marriage, Helen ponders a difficult question: What is a life without the ability to choose? How do you answer this?

**12.** Think about Helen. Miss Kingston, a family friend, wishes the young woman had "a little imagination." What might she mean by this? Is her assessment of Helen correct? Of Helen it is said "it's as well she kept herself from novels." Why? Can reading a novel be dangerous?

**13.** John grew up as a neglected orphan. How is he capable of such deep romantic and paternal love as an adult? Why are John and Helen drawn to each other? What does family mean to each of them? Compare and contrast John and Asa. How do their shared experiences and losses unite and divide them?

**14.** What is your opinion of Asa? He is a self-made businessman and a devout man. How does his business success and his faith sustain him? How do they fail him? How does losing the women he loves affect him? When John is leaving, Asa asks him if he will be lonely, and gives him a shell. "Take it," he tells him. "You'll miss the sea." Why does he do this? Why does John later toss the shell away?

**15.** Consider the image of the martin momentarily trapped in Asa's house. What might it symbolize? How are the novel's themes --- love, loss, sacrifice, duty, freedom, choice --- demonstrated through the various characters' experiences? Choose one or two themes and characters to explain.

**16.** Think about the spiritual lives of the characters in this novel. How do the characters engage with both organized religion and personal faith? How do John and Asa respond differently after their wives die in childbirth? How do their religious beliefs change over time? Does Christianity look different to a slaveowner like Helen and an enslaved person like Moll?

**17.** Think about the structure of the novel. It begins in the present, goes back in time, then returns to the present. How does this structure add to the story's power? Why do you think the author chose to tell the story this way?

**18.** What did you take away from reading *THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA*?

## Author Bio

Katy Simpson Smith was born and raised in Jackson, Mississippi. She is the author of the novels *THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA*, a *Vogue* best book of the year; *FREE MEN*; *THE EVERLASTING*, a *New York Times* best historical fiction book of the year; and *THE WEEDS*. She is also the author of *WE HAVE RAISED ALL OF YOU: Motherhood in the South, 1750-1835*. Her writing has appeared in *The Paris Review*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, the *Oxford American*, *Granta* and *Literary Hub*, among other publications. She received a PhD in history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars. She lives in New Orleans.

## Critical Praise

?THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA is the best novel I have read all year. The writing is word-perfect with its nearly biblical cadences, its taut and relentlessly spare sentences, and its unusually wise utterances, all of which contribute to the sheer joy that comes from finding oneself in an imagined universe that feels as real as a splinter in a finger. I have a short shelf of books that I think of as my well, ones I go to often to remind myself what good writing is. On it are, among others, MARLETTE IN ECSTASY by Ron Hansen, CAL by Bernard Maclaverty, LIES OF SILENCE by Brian Moore, TRANSIT OF VENUS by Shirley Hazzard and the first chapter of ON CHESIL BEACH by Ian McEwan. THE STORY OF LAND AND SEA will join that shelf when published. The arresting prose, vividly original characters, and narrative drive with which Smith tells this story of desperate familial love on a long-ago coast provided this reader with several hours of pure pleasure and a rare glimpse of grace in a fictional world.?

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## **The Story of Land and Sea**

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