THE JUMP-OFF CREEK

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—Philadelphia Inquirer

This universally acclaimed novel trumpeted the arrival of a uniquely original voice in American fiction. The Jump-Off Creek unfurls a full-length portrait, with landscape, of an unforgettable pioneer woman who confronts and conquers the demands of homesteading alone in northeast Oregon’s Blue Mountains in the 1890s. Lydia Sanderson carves a self-reliant life out of an unforgiving wilderness, arriving at Jump-Off Creek with two mules, two goats, and only those possessions that the mules can carry. In alternating entries from Lydia’s journal and narrative chapters of shifting perspective—those of Lydia herself, cowboy-cook Tim Whiteaker, part-Indian Blue Odell, wolfers Danny Turnbow and Harley Osgood—Molly Gloss chronicles Lydia’s first nine months on her dearly purchased high-mountain homestead and her tree-felling, calf-branding, bear-tracking, fence-building relationships with the laconic Whiteaker, his partner Blue, and the other widely dispersed denizens of the hardscrabble mountains.

Molly Gloss describes in vivid detail Lydia “crossing the long, golden ridges slowly in a bright wind;” the seemingly incessant rain, mud-making in summer, freezing in fall and winter; the movements of mule and steer; roughened, work-creased hands and hearts; feelings revealed through tucked-in chins, awkward conversations, thin smiles, or the offer of a simple mug of coffee; washed-out trails; a cowboy’s skills as a cook; the endless backbreaking work. From April through December, from Lydia Sanderson’s first meeting (she’s lost) with taciturn Tim Whiteaker to their agreement to put up hay come spring, The Jump-Off Creek dispels all of our stereotypes of the West and the frontier. Women did clear trees and drive cattle; men did cook and do laundry. “This is the West behind the swaggering and hokum,” wrote Ursula Le Guin; “these people really work, these guns really kill.” Molly Gloss gives us a new vision of homesteading and of a singular woman determined to go it alone on the Jump-Off Creek.
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Molly Gloss describes in vivid detail Lydia “crossing the long, golden ridges slowly in a bright wind;” the seemingly incessant “sweat, tears, heartache;” the seemingly incessant “irritation over the smallest things.” What are some other examples of what Lydia values? What are some of the hardships endured by Lydia and the others that require both tenderness and an absence of pity? What are some of the hardships endured by Lydia and the others that require both tenderness and an absence of pity?

FOR DISCUSSION
We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and, for every reader, provide a deeper understanding of The Jump-Off Creek.

1. What details of frontier life emerge from Molly Gloss’s portrait of the Blue Mountain homesteaders in the 1890s? What is the significance of the name Jump-Off Creek for Lydia and the earlier pioneer women with whom she feels kinship?

2. What has driven Lydia Sanderson to homestead on her own in the remote, sparsely populated Blue Mountains of Oregon? What is the significance of her statement to Blue Odell that “I was seeking the boundless possibilities that are said to live on the frontier”? What are some of those boundless possibilities, and do they change for Lydia?

3. In Chapter 4, we learn that Lydia “had a habit of going quick in these events, before the misgiving would set in.” What instance are we shown of Lydia’s “going quick” when confronted with difficulty or danger? In what ways does this habit serve her well, or not?

4. Lydia writes in her journal, “I am used to being alone, in spirit if not body, and shall not be Lonely, as I have never been inclined that way.” Yet Evelyn Walker, in Chapter 16, reflects on her own loneliness and triggers a similar unspoken response on Lydia’s part. How does Lydia deal with being alone?

5. In Chapter 12, Blue sees Lydia “hiding [a] little flash of satisfaction” when she brings down a calf for the first time. Why does this incident fill Lydia with such satisfaction? What other activities provide Lydia with a sense of satisfaction, reward, or pleasure?

6. How would you describe the reality of women’s lives on the northwest frontier? How does each woman—Lydia, Evelyn Walker, Doris Oberfeld—cope with the challenges of living as a woman, single or married, on the frontier?

7. Every once in a while, Lydia feels “a sudden itchy need for sympathy, or for forgiveness” or for just some human interaction. In what ways does she deal with those needs? Does she fully appreciate the limitations of the life she has chosen?

8. Why do you think details of Lydia’s Pennsylvania past and her reasons for heading west begin to emerge nearly halfway through the novel, after we have already begun to form an impression of her? What are the “Graces” to which she refers? What additional graces does she discover during the subsequent six months?

9. We learn of Lydia, as she is stitching up Blue’s back: “She was tender, but pitiless, having never gained pity and so never learning it.” What are some of the hardships endured by Lydia and the others that require both tenderness and an absence of pity?

10. What might be Tim’s motives for suggesting marriage to Lydia, and Lydia’s for saying no? What other indications are there that marriage is expected of Lydia and other women?

11. As cold nights return in October, Lydia admits that she “had no instinct yet for the weather in this country.”“How does Lydia prepare for the onset of winter? Are her preparations adequate?”

12. One of Tim Whiteaker’s infrequent aphorisms is “Carelessness is something that will get people killed.” What does he mean by this? What are some other examples of what Lydia values?

13. Lydia notes that Tim and Blue’s house “looked well established and was soundly built.” And Gloss adds, “She set a high value on those things.” What are some other examples of what Lydia values?

14. In her first journal entry at Jump-Off Creek, Lydia writes, “I have not lost Heart, having done so in years past and no false hopes this time. There are Graces at all events.” What are the “Graces” to which she refers? What additional graces does she discover during the subsequent six months?

15. What impact does the wolf bounty have on the motivations and actions of the Blue Mountain homesteaders, trappers, and ranchers? What are its consequences?

16. What is “the quick, small grief” that Lydia unexpectedly feels when she learns that Evelyn Walker will go to her mother’s to have her baby? Why does Lydia experience this grief, which she finds inexplicable?

17. What are some of the ways in which the outside world encroaches on the inhabitants of the Blue Mountains?

18. How does The Jump-Off Creek change what you thought you knew about the West, men’s and women’s roles on the frontier, and homesteading at the turn of the century? What was the biggest surprise or challenge to a preconception you might have had about frontier homesteading?
Molly Gloss is a native Oregonian who grew up listening to tales of her family’s “westering women”—the German bride who crossed the country in a covered wagon; the woman whose husband abandoned her and six children on the Walla Walla plains; the grandmother who gave birth to the first white child born in Irion County, Texas; the Molly for whom she was named, a Texas farmwife whose last born of twelve children were named Y and Z. Gloss also confessed, in a 1998 interview with The Oregonian, that “I grew up reading traditional Western novels . . . and never have gotten over a certain shamefaced affection for them.” She especially draws attention to the women of Louis L’Amour’s novels, women who “are always as tough as the men, sometimes tougher, and quick to pick up a rifle and defend the place.”

The Jump-Off Creek is, in part, the result of family stories and of Gloss’s reading; and her heroine Lydia Sanderson is certainly “as tough as the men” with whom she shares the Blue Mountains, “sometimes tougher.”

Molly Gloss is the author of many short stories and a novel for young adults, Outside the Gates, published both here and abroad. Her third novel, The Dazzle of Day, was a New York Times Notable Book of 1997. Her next novel, tentatively titled Mountains of the Moon, is set “in 1905 in the woods of Washington state, and concerns a wildly outrageous feminist, mother of five children, who supports her family by writing adventure-romance novels . . . “ (The Oregonian) Gloss lives in Portland with her husband and son and hikes the same Blue Mountain trails blazed by her pioneer forebears.

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