

Book
Club
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ABOUT JENNIFER L. WRIGHT



Jennifer L. Wright has been writing since middle school, eventually earning a master's degree in journalism at Indiana University. However, it took only a few short months of covering the local news for her to realize that writing fiction is much better for the soul and definitely way more fun. A born and bred Hoosier, she was plucked from the Heartland after being swept off her feet by an Air Force pilot and has spent the past decade traveling the world and, every few years, attempting to make old curtains fit in the windows of a new home.

She currently resides in New Mexico with her husband, two children, and one rambunctious dachshund.

P.S. Visit jennwrightwrites.com & sign up for the author's newsletter to get news & updates delivered directly to your inbox.



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Kathryn and Melissa in Their Own Words

Answers courtesy of Jennifer L. Wright



Kathryn

One word Kathryn would choose to describe herself:

Though she'd never admit it (even to herself), if she was being honest, I think Kathryn would describe herself as defective. She has lived with this chip on her shoulder for many years and has a deep-seated sense that something is wrong with her—and not just physically.

One word Kathryn would use to describe Melissa:

Perfect. To Kathryn, Melissa is the embodiment of everything she wants but could never be. She is warm, loving, kind, patient, gentle, responsible, and beautiful—all while being completely humble or oblivious to those qualities in herself. Because Melissa plays both a sister and mother role in her life, Kathryn is torn between being thankful for these qualities and being jealous of them.

One dream she has for her future:

Kathryn, above all, wishes to be self-sufficient. She has hopes of owning and running her family farm in her beloved Oklahoma. She dreams of one day having a family of her own, including a husband who loves her for who she is and helps her out of genuine devotion, not out of pity, necessity, or obligation. But this dream has always been secondary to her desire for her own independent life.

One thing that inspires her:

*Melissa shared Helen Keller's autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, with Kathryn at a young age, and Kathryn found inspiration in Keller's amazing life and work. It was Keller's tenacity and determination that, early on, helped mold Kathryn's attitude toward her own disability. At least until the other Helen came along.*

Someday, she would like to travel to:

Oz (though she knows this isn't truly possible . . . or is it?).

Melissa

One word Melissa would choose to describe herself:

Dutiful. *Melissa, above all, seeks to serve the needs of others above herself. Right or wrong, her empathetic heart binds her to the role she feels she must fulfill to all those around her.*

One thing that inspires her:

Melissa enjoys perusing issues of Good Housekeeping at the local library (a subscription of her own is a luxury she'd never indulge in), and she is inspired by all of the recipes, sewing patterns, and housekeeping tips within its pages. She often chastises herself for feeling dissatisfied with her own living conditions after flipping through the articles, but she keeps ideas tucked away in the back of her mind in the hopes that, one day, she'll have a home of her own where she can use the stored information.

If she wrote a book, it would be about:

Keeping a home when your home won't keep.

Where she would live if given the chance:

Melissa would love to live in a bigger town, perhaps Dalhart or even Amarillo (though anywhere bigger would make her feel claustrophobic), simply for the luxuries and experiences a big city could provide. Really, though, she'd be willing to move almost anywhere for a husband and family who loved her . . . if she could convince Kathryn to come with her.

A quote that she loves:

"All you need is confidence in yourself. There is no living thing that is not afraid when it faces danger. True courage is facing danger when you are afraid, and that kind of courage you have in plenty."

-The Wizard, The Wonderful Wizard of Oz, chapter 15

Melissa loved to share this quote with Kathryn anytime things got tough or she was afraid; Kathryn was unaware the quote was just as much for her sister as it was for her.



A Step Back In Time: Researching the Dust Bowl with Jennifer L. Wright

To inform your understanding of the Melissa's and Kathryn's world in the novel and to gain fresh insights into the time period, read this note from the author prior to your group discussion.

I am a naturally curious person.

Okay, some people might call me nosy, but I prefer curious. If I see, read, or hear something I don't know about, I tend to fall down a rabbit hole of research, hoping to quench that inquisitive thirst. When I spent two years living in South Korea, for example, I devoured every book, movie, and television show I could find about the Korean War, Korean culture, and Korean history.

And so it's been in every place I've lived, New Mexico being no exception. My daughter was born shortly after we arrived, and I spent many hours in her second-story bedroom, rocking her to sleep while staring out across the expanse of open desert. One afternoon, I watched in horrified fascination as a wall of dust barreled toward our home. The cloud of earth blocked the sun as it approached,

covering my entire town in an eerie brown and gray light. I could not even see the neighbor's house, mere feet from my own. It took hours for the air to clear and the dirt to slowly settle back to the ground.

And thus, my fascination with dust was born.

A trip to my local library a few days after the storm resulted in mounds of books about dust storms and, more specifically, the Dust Bowl. I started with nonfiction, such as *The Dust Bowl: Men, Dirt, and Depression* by Paul Bonnifield and, my personal favorite, *The Worst Hard Time* by Timothy Egan, before moving on to some fascinating fictionalized accounts, like Susie Finkbeiner's *A Cup of Dust* and *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck. I also spent hours watching and re-watching the stellar Ken Burns documentary *The Dust Bowl*.

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Although I'd learned the basics of the "Dirty Thirties" in elementary school history classes, the stories contained within these books and movies humanized the struggles faced by millions of Americans—struggles we so often overlook, as it was sandwiched between two great wars.

If It Rains was born out of a desire to bring further recognition to these survivors, and the narratives I devoured became the inspiration not only for the characters of Melissa and Kathryn, but for the world they inhabited.

The rabbit drive scene, for example, though horrifying, was based on eyewitness accounts of one such massacre, as referenced in Egan's book. Melt White, who was just a boy at the time, recounted the ordeal that gave him "nightmares that never left." Other episodes, such as rain merchant Frank Fleming's failed experiment and even the massive hailstorm during the climactic scene between Melissa and Henry, also came from recollections of people who witnessed these real-life events.

Tucked into these resources were also small details of everyday life in the Dust Bowl. Melissa's observation that no snakes or centipedes hid within the walls of Henry's house came from an interview with Ike Osteen, who grew up in a dugout and recalled his mother pouring boiling water over the walls each spring to kill the freshly hatched insects and animals burrowing their way out. Likewise, Kathryn's lament about "sandy milk" came from farmers' stories about their livestock ingesting so much dust, both their meat and their milk were full of grit.

The area commonly referred to as the Dust Bowl stretched from Nebraska to Texas and affected over 2 million people. I chose Boise City as the setting for *If It Rains* because it lay right in the epicenter. Although that part of the country is prone to periods of wind and drought, the severity of the dust storms during the 1930s was man-made: an influx of settlers in the early twentieth century intent on plowing land not meant to be plowed ripped out the natural vegetation holding the ground in place. Without

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this organic system of checks and balances, the environment became unstable. Kathryn's realization about her family's role in the calamity was an important turning point in her own maturity, as well as an imperative lesson to learn if she wished to return and truly thrive in Oklahoma. It also echoed the lesson thousands of real-life "Okies" were forced to confront and accept.

Despite their culpability in the disaster, the people of the Dust Bowl are to be commended for their willingness to adapt. Bolstered by hope and assisted by scientists, those that stayed replanted grass, dug trenches for trees, and modified their farming methods to work with the climate rather than against it.

I hope that readers of *If It Rains* will be inspired to conduct their own research into the Dust Bowl era and find out about the extraordinary efforts of farmers, scientists, and government officials not only to survive the times, but also to ensure they never happen again. I recommend starting with the resources mentioned in this article and allowing your curiosity to carry you wherever it will.

No matter what people may tell you, some of the best experiences of my life—including the writing of this book—came from my own insatiable nosiness.

And for one last, fun nugget, the title of this book came from a newspaper article written by *Associated Press* reporter Robert Geiger after he witnessed a particularly intense dust storm near Guymon, Oklahoma: "Three little words—achingly familiar on a Western farmer's tongue—rule life today in the dust bowl of the continent . . . if it rains."

"Wright's adept depiction of the times capture the grit of the Dust Bowl."

Publishers Weekly

5 Moments from *If It Rains* to Discuss with Your Book Club

Read these passages and questions below provided by the author and discuss them with your group to discover fresh insights into the story.

1.) In chapter three, Pa confronts Kathryn about her secret desire for surgery to fix her leg with the words, "Ain't that what you been wishing for?" Rather than answer him, Kathryn thinks about all the things she has wished for, including not having been born crippled and that her father and Helen had never met. She ends by saying, "Most of all, though, I wished it would rain." This line characterizes Kathryn and exposes her inner thoughts and feelings more than any other. Why do you think she wishes for rain above all these other things?

2.) In chapter five, Pa recounts to Kathryn the story of his da's forced immigration from Ireland, telling her, "The stars make no noise. Yet you notice 'em anyway. Your eyes are always drawn up. . . . Even against all that blackness, they're there. The darkness doesn't scare 'em. In fact, you notice them 'em precisely because of the dark. Because they keep going. In a dark, scary, noisy world, they shine out bright, quiet, and brave." This tale, along with its moral, has a deep connection to both Kathryn's and Melissa's stories. What correlations can you make between Pa's story and Kathryn's journey? What about Melissa's?

3.) In chapter eleven, Kathryn makes the decision to remain with Frank Fleming, saying, "And so we hobbled, two cripples headed east, neither of us quite sure why or where to go." None of the companions she encounters on her journey are physically handicapped, and yet Frank is not the only one Kathryn views as a fellow cripple. In what ways are Frank, Mr. Hickory, and Bert disabled, and how does that play a part in Kathryn's relationship with each one of them?

4.) In chapter twenty-two, after coming to terms with the shambles of her marriage, Melissa says, "I didn't pray for rain. Like the scorched earth that no longer gave way beneath my feet, I was too far gone for rain. Rain would not save my marriage or my home. Rain would not save me. So I did not pray for rain. I prayed for absolution." This moment marks a turning point for Melissa. What insight does this give you into her growth, not only in her heart but in her mind and spirit? How has she changed from the beginning of the book, and is that change positive or negative in your opinion?

5.) In chapter twenty-four, Annie Gale, taking a cue from *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, concedes to Melissa that "to the Henry Mayfields of the world, you may be a bad wife, but I think you're a good woman." This is something many Christians deal with in the world today. Oftentimes we are seen as "bad" by the world's standards when we stand up for the tenets of our faith. Is Melissa a bad wife and, if so, in what ways? In what ways is she a good woman? How have you seen aspects of this seeming contradiction in your own life?

Passages I want to discuss in book club:

Make note of scenes from the novel you want to talk about with your group and then include those in your book club conversation about the novel.





DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- 1.) *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* serves as a touchstone for both Kathryn and Melissa. In what ways does Kathryn's journey to Indianapolis parallel Dorothy's journey to Oz? What nods to that classic story (both the book and the movie) did you spot along the way?
- 2.) When did you first begin to suspect what kind of man Henry Mayfield was? When does Melissa start to acknowledge that he's not the man she believed him to be? How does she try to hold on, to believe in his love for her?
- 3.) Why do you think Kathryn and Helen dislike each other so much? At the start of the story, did you feel sympathy for Helen? Did our view of her change by the end?
- 4.) Despite the drought and all the hardships they've experienced, Melissa and Kathryn both feel a deep connection to Oklahoma. Did you understand their love for the land, or would you have counseled them to leave for somewhere more hospitable? Do you have the same kind of deep roots in any particular place?
- 5.) Like the Scarecrow, the Tin Woodman, and the Cowardly Lion, many of us find ourselves thinking we'd be better off "If I only had a ____." For Kathryn, that something is a normal foot. How does her view of her clubfoot shift over the course of the story? What did you think of her eventual decision regarding her foot? What has the longed-for something been in your own life?

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6.) Melissa begins the story clinging to the faith she learned from her mother, whereas Kathryn thinks God picks on her and becomes increasingly convinced that He can't be good. Which perspective did you most identify with? How does each sister's faith change by the story's end?

7.) As Frank Fleming employs his method to bring rain, Kathryn watches while "rocket after rocket fizzled, and still Frank tried. Because the world needed fixing, and he honestly believed he could do it." Do you agree with her view of Frank, or did you see him as merely a charlatan? Can you think of times when you've witnessed similar desperate hope—and anger, like the crowd's, when that hope is disappointed?

8.) Looking at Annie Gale, Melissa recognizes, "The woman was me. Me several years in the future. Me without this new dress and my new last name. Me in another life, another world, another twist of fate." How does identifying with Annie in this way inspire Melissa's actions? Do you believe she goes about helping Annie in the right way?

9.) Kathryn tells Bert, "This drought, this depression . . . we're in the blackness. We can either shine in the dark or be overcome by it. Sometimes shining means staying. Other times it means going. But it never means to quit." How do you see characters in this story attempting to shine light in the darkness? In times of darkness, when you've felt helpless against the wrongs in the world, what has your response been—to stay or to go? To you, did that represent quitting or shining in the dark?

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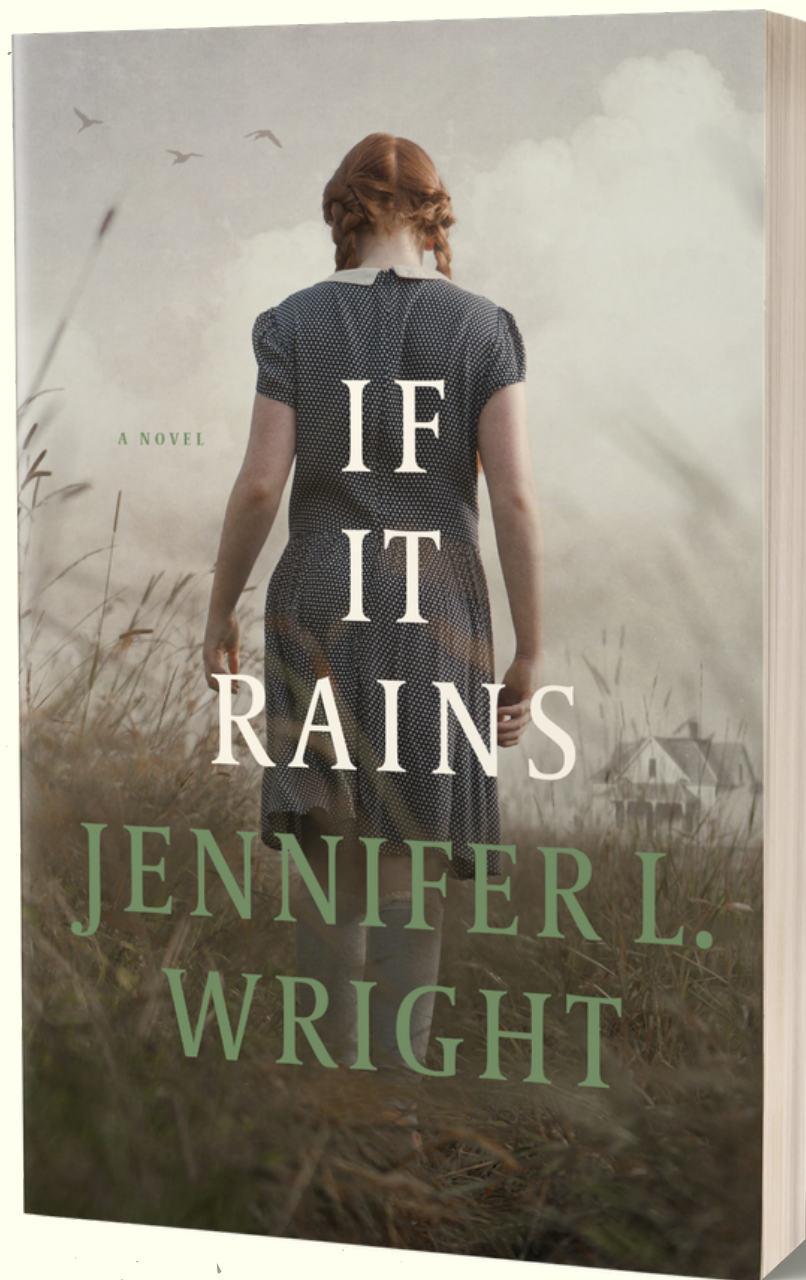
10.) Considering the women of the church, Melissa observes, “Even these women, for all their love and faith, for all their respect within the community, were still just pawns in the game, powerless to change the rules, so intent on enforcing them instead.” Have you observed this within a community—that those who can’t change the rules instead work to enforce them?

11.) Annie and Melissa argue over Dorothy’s characterization of the Wizard: “He was a good man, even if he was a bad Wizard.” What does Annie ultimately conclude about this line? Do you think this mix of good and bad is true of human nature? How do you see it reflected in characters throughout this story?

12.) Both Melissa and Kathryn frequently long for the rain to fall. What do you think the rain symbolizes for each of them, besides literal relief from the drought?



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