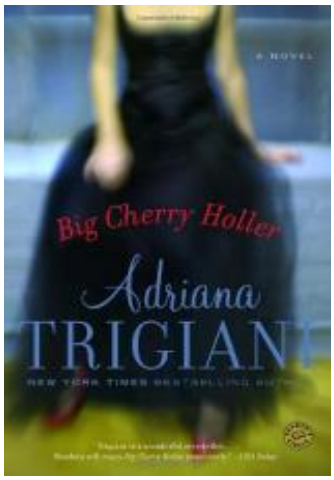
Big Cherry Holler

by Adriana Trigiani



About the Book

Big Cherry Holler, the extraordinary sequel to **Big Stone Gap**, takes us back to the mountain life that enchanted us in Adriana Trigiani?s best selling debut novel. It?s been eight years since the town pharmacist and long time spinster Ave Maria Mulligan married coal miner Jack MacChesney. With her new found belief in love and its possibilities, Ave Maria makes a life for herself and her growing family, hoping that her fearless leap into commitment will make happiness stay. What she didn?t count on was that fate, life, and the ghosts of the past would come to haunt her and, eventually, test the love she has for her husband. The mountain walls that have protected her all of her life can not spare Ave Maria the life lessons she must learn.

Big Cherry Holler is the story of a marriage, revealing the deep secrets, the power struggle, the betrayal and the unmet expectations that exist between husband and wife. It is the story of a community that must reinvent itself as it comes to grips with the decline of the coal mining industry. It is the story of an extended family, the people of **Big Stone Gap**, who are there for one another especially when times are tough?including bookmobile librarian and sexpert Iva Lou Wade Makin, savvy businesswoman Pearl Grimes, crusty cashier Fleeta Mullins, and Rescue Squad captain Spec Broadwater, who faces the complications of his double life. Ave Maria?s best friend Theodore Tipton, now band director at the University of Tennessee, continues to be her chief counselor and conscience as he reaches the pinnacle of marching band success.

When Ave Maria takes her daughter to Italy for the summer, she meets a handsome stranger who offers her a life beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains. Ave Maria is forced to confront what is truly important: to her, to her marriage, and to her family. Brimming with humor, wisdom, honesty, and the drama and local color of mountain life from Virginia to Italy, **Big Cherry Holler** is a deeply felt, brilliantly evoked story of two lovers who have lost their way and their struggle to find one another again.

Discussion Guide

1. **Big Cherry Holler** is a sequel to the bestselling Big Stone Gap. Does it help to read **Big Stone Gap** before delving into **Big Cherry Holler**? How did the author structure this book as a stand-alone novel, and how does it function as a continuation of the first book?

2. What is the significance of the title **Big Cherry Holler**, both literally and figuratively?

3. When the book opens, Ave Maria and Jack Mac have been married for eight years. How have her attitudes about herself and about relationships changed during that time? How has she remained a "spinster" in spirit?

4. Early in the book, it's disclosed that Jack and Ave's son, Joe, died after a sudden illness. In what ways do Jack and Ave deal with his death, both separately and together? How does their marriage bear the scars of their son's untimely death?

5. What role does small-town life--both in Italy and in Big Stone Gap--play in Ave's life? How do the mammoth physical attributes of the outside world play against her life?

6. Ave Maria sees Jack Mac chatting with a tanned, blond woman named Karen Bell, and immediately feels anxious. What evidence of marital estrangement accumulates after that incident? What aspects of Karen's personality do you think would appeal to Jack Mac?

7. w does Ave Maria see Karen Bell as a rival, and in which ways does she feel superior to her? Which feeling ultimately proves more accurate?

8. Were you surprised by the revelation of Theodore's homosexuality? Which clues--both in this book and in Big Stone Gap--are provided before his confession? How do you think this will affect his relationship with Ave?

9. When Ave's protege, Pearl, pleads with Ave to become a partner in the pharmacy, she signs on without consulting Jack Mac (much to his chagrin). What other decisions in her life does Ave keep to herself? Is Jack justified in his anger, or does he, too, keep some aspects of his life private? Which ones?

10. Ave's daughter, Etta, is a main character in the book. Ave describes her as "wide open, and yet very private." What parallels can you draw between Ave and Etta, and how are the two characters different? How is Etta a product of Jack Mac's influence? How does she cope with her brother's death?

11. How do the women of **Big Stone Gap**--Fleeta, Pearl, Iva Lou--function as a sort of Greek chorus for Ave? How does Ave affect each of their lives, and how do they, in turn, influence hers? How has each woman evolved throughout the two books?

12. The reader sees Ave Maria in a brand-new environment when she travels to Italy. Which facets of her personality come to the forefront? To what factors do you attribute this change in attitude and appearance?

13. While in Italy, Ave imagines what her life would have been like had her mother not married Fred Mulligan. How do

you envision Ave's life if she had grown up in Italy? Would it have been more or less fulfilling?

14. Ave's haircut spurs an absolute transformation. In which other ways does her appearance play a role throughout the book? Of which other novels is this reminiscent?

15. What does Pete represent to Ave, both literally and figuratively? How does he reawaken passion in her?

16. Theodore dismisses Ave's assertion that she didn't really have an affair with Pete. How is this juxtaposition of "word vs. deed" a recurrent motif in the book? What examples can you find in the behavior of Ave, Jack Mac, and their friends?

17. When Jack Mac and Ave have their confrontation about Karen Bell, Ave admits that she wanted him to "take her pain away." Besides Joe's death, what other issues has Ave Maria grappled with throughout her life? How has she usually dealt with any pain she has suffered?

18. Do you believe that Jack Mac consummated his affair with Karen Bell? What evidence do you have for that conclusion?

19. Jack Mac tells Ave, "I truly believed in us, and you never did." What actions echo Jack Mac's assertion? How does Jack Mac demonstrate his love for Ave?

20. At the end of Aunt Alice's life, Ave makes an effort to reconcile with her. To what do you attribute this change of heart? How does Ave's relationship with Alice compare to the one she enjoys with her "Eye-talian" relatives?

21. What significance do you derive from the fact that Jack Mac and Pete get along immediately? What does Pete's appearance in **Big Stone Gap**, as promised, indicate about his character? How is he similar to Jack Mac, and how is he different?

22. Do you feel that this book is a lead-up to Etta's stand-alone story? How do you envision Etta's adolescence and adulthood?

23. Adriana Trigiani, the book's author, also is an accomplished playwright. How does this novel have the feel of a play--whether through Trigiani's use of dialogue, setting, conflict, or any other literary device?

Author Bio

Adriana Trigiani is the *New York Times* bestselling author of 21 books of fiction and nonfiction. Her work has been published in 38 languages around the world. An award-winning playwright, television writer/producer, and filmmaker, Trigiani wrote and directed the major motion picture of her debut novel, BIG STONE GAP; adapted her novel, VERY VALENTINE, for television; and directed the documentary, *Queens of the Big Time*, among others.

In 2023, President Sergio Matterella of Italy awarded Trigiani the *Cavaliere dell?Ordine della Stella d?Italia*. The Library of Virginia bestowed their highest honor, the *Patron of Letters* degree, to Trigiani in 2024. She received the

2025 Ellis Island Medal of Honor for her significant contributions to literature, culture, and communicty.

Trigiani grew up in Appalachia, in the mountains of Virginia, where she co-founded The Origin Project, a year-round, in-school writing program that has served over 25,000 students since its inception in 2014. Trigiani is proud to serve on the New York State Council on the Arts. She lives in Greenwich Village with her family.

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