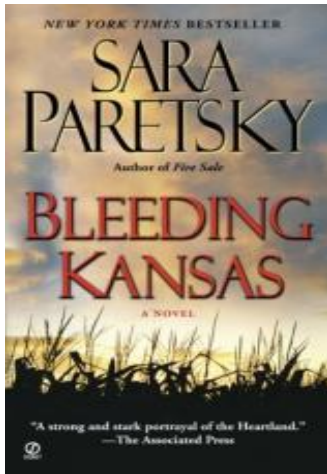


# Bleeding Kansas

by Sara Paretsky

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## About the Book

Set in the Kaw River Valley where Paretsky grew up, **Bleeding Kansas** is the story of the Schapens and the Grelliers, two farm families whose histories have been entwined since the 1850s, when their ancestors settled the valley as antislavery emigrants.

Today, the Schapen family, terrified by the lawlessness of the 1970s --- when Lawrence was the most violent college town in the nation --- has turned to that old-time religion for security. The Schapens keep a close eye on all their neighbors, most especially the Grelliers. They maintain careful track of everyone's misdeeds, printing the most egregious on their family website. When Gina Haring, a Wiccan, moves into an empty farmhouse and starts practicing pagan rites, the family members are so outraged that they begin an active harassment campaign against the Wiccans.

The Schapens worry, too, about who stands better with the Lord: their family or the Grelliers. When a Schapen cow gives birth to what may be a "Perfect Red Heifer" --- needed if the temple is ever rebuilt in Jerusalem --- the Schapens feel convinced that God is indeed smiling on them.

Despite parental cautions, the Grelliers' teenagers are enraged by the Schapens. All their short lives, they and the young Schapens have fought. One particularly angry confrontation causes Chip Grellier to be expelled from school and consequently to join the army. Chip's death in Iraq is the catalyzing event for momentous changes in the lives of not only both the Schapens and the Grelliers but of all the families in the valley. The powerful, climactic scene at Gina Haring's Samhain bonfire will forever haunt the reader.

## Discussion Guide

1. Discuss Susan's fascination with the history of the Grelliers and Abigail's diaries. Why do you think she attaches herself so strongly to her husband's family history?
2. What is your first impression of Gina Haring? Does your perception of her change as you learn more about her?
3. At various points in the story, Myra Schapen uses the family website to report the misdeeds and misfortunes of her neighbors, most importantly the Grelliers. Do you view the website as a source of power for the Schapens? How is media, in general, portrayed in the story?
4. Jim tries to think of his son's death as the result of a number of different forces, whereas Susan blames herself. What do you think most influenced Chip's decision to join the army and, subsequently, be killed?
5. Susan makes a point to call her children by their proper names, rather than their nicknames like everyone else. Why do you think this is?
6. Jim emphasizes the sentiment that "you can't farm in the valley if you're on bad terms with your neighbors." Indeed, community values are embraced by most of the families in the valley --- with the exception of the Schapens. At the same time, however, Kaw River Valley seems to be the breeding ground for outcasts, including Gina Haring, Robbie, and even Lara herself. How do you feel about this juxtaposition?
7. Do you see a difference between the Schapens' spying habits and Lara Grellier's own compulsion to sneak into other people's houses?
8. The perfect red heifer represents different things for different groups. The Jews view her as the key component to rebuild their Temple and the Schapens, specifically Myra, Junior, and Arnie, see her as profit. Can you think of what the heifer might mean to Robbie?
9. Throughout the story, various characters use the words "dyke" and "retarded." How do you feel about these words and their uses in the story?
10. Although in different ways, Susan and Elaine both lost a child. Are there any other parallels between the two women?
11. In chapter 51, Pastor Nabo attempts an exorcism on Robbie, Lara, and Elaine. How did this scene make you feel?
12. Elaine never falters in her accusation of Myra Schapen as the person responsible for the fire in the bunkhouse. However, late in the story Jim remembers his own grandfather's grievances with the hippies. Who do you think set the fire, if anyone, and for what reason?
13. Discuss your feelings at the end of the story. Do you think it could have ended differently?

## Author Bio

Hailed by the *Washington Post* as "the definition of perfection in the genre," Sara Paretsky is the *New York Times* bestselling author of numerous novels, including the renowned V.I. Warshawski series. She is one of only four living writers to have received both the Grand Master Award from the Mystery Writers of America and the Cartier Diamond Dagger from the Crime Writers Association of Great Britain. She lives in Chicago.

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