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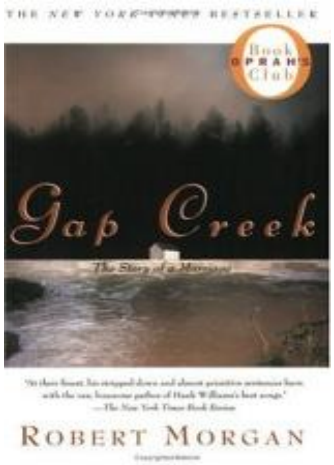
Gap Creek

by Robert Morgan



About the Book

There is a most unusual woman living in Gap Creek. Julie Harmon works hard, "hard as a man" they say, so hard that at times she's not sure she can stop. People depend on her.

She is just a teenager when her brother dies in her arms. The following year, she marries Hank and moves down into the valley. Julie and Hank discover that the modern world is complex, grinding ever on without pause or concern for their hard work. To survive, they must find out whether love can keep chaos and madness at bay.

With Julie, Robert Morgan has brought to life one of the most memorable women in modern American literature with the skill that led Fred Chappell to say "**Gap Creek** is the work of a master."

Discussion Guide

1. Julie is only in her teens when the novel opens, yet she has already learned to face life's hardships with a resiliency that is remarkable in one so young. We think of adolescence as a time of rebellion, yet Julie offers very little resistance to anything Mama and Papa tell her to do. Why do you think she is so accepting of her role? Sometimes Julie inwardly simmers at what she is asked to do, "but I didn't have any choice," she says. Is that true? What choices does she have?

2. Even though two of her sisters are older than she is, Julie is the one everyone counts on. "Everything that was hard fell to me, and everything that nobody else wanted to do fell to me." Why? What is the author saying about Julie? About those who depend on her? About the time and place in which she grows up? "Because you're the strongest one in the family. And because everyone has to do what they can," is her mama's explanation. What do you think of that philosophy? In what ways do people live up or down to what is expected of them?

3. When Julie helps her father carry her dying brother down the mountain, "it was the prettiest night you ever saw...It

was the first time I ever noticed how the way the world looks don't have a thing to do with what's going on with people." Talk about both the beauty and the impersonality of nature in the novel. What is the author saying about the cycle of human life? Where does religion fit into Julie's world view?

4. Before Julie meets Hank she thinks about falling in love with "a strong man that knowed what he wanted and could teach you." Contrast this image with what she finds in Hank. "I don't know why his look stung me so deep at that instant. We don't ever know why we fall in love with one person as opposed to another," she says. Is this true? Is it something a young girl might think, but that a mature woman might have a different perspective on? Talk about the importance of chemistry in a love relationship. Is it more or less important to you than shared interests and values? Why? What do you think of love at first sight?

5. Julie imagined her marriage would be something wonderful, but finds it different from what she expected. Her mama's view of marriage was simple: "Like everything else it is work, hard work." Do you think marriage is hard work? Contrast the way Julie responds to their hard life with the way that Hank responds. How do you think the different outlooks of Mama and Ma Richards have contributed to their offspring's readiness for the responsibilities of marriage?

6. Throughout the novel, we are given very detailed descriptions of the difficult and often unpleasant chores that Julie performs -- from butchering a hog to laying out Mr. Pendergast's body after he dies from the fire. Does this help you to understand just how hard life was in Appalachia at the turn of the last century? Do you find Julie's capacity to endure despite unrelenting sorrows inspirational? Depressing?

7. "It was like we formed a special kinship in the kitchen," Julie says after sharing some unexpected pleasant moments with her mother-in-law. She experiences similar intimacy in her kitchen cooking a meal with her sister Lou. Discuss the special place that the kitchen can hold in women's lives. Julie experiences a similar bonding experience with two new women friends from church who bring her homemade jelly and clothes for the baby she is expecting. Why do you think the author has Julie find sustenance from women during the harsh winter and so little emotional support from her husband?

8. When Hank realizes Julie has been conned out of money by a lawyer, Hank smacks her across the face and cruelly insults her. Discuss Julie's reaction to his temper. When they make up in bed, Julie thinks "In the dark what mattered was we was together and naked...We would always find a way to live, a way to get back, as long as we could love." Do you share Julie's faith in their love? Why?

9. When Gap Creek rises and floods their house, something snaps in Hank who, shotgun in hand, threatens to shoot himself, and maybe Julie, too. "I ruint your life...I ought to kill us both," he shouts. As the disasters continue to pile up that bitter winter, Hank slides into a deep depression broken by fits of rage. Do you wonder why Julie continues to stick by him? What do you think of Hank?

10. All alone in the house with the nearest neighbor a mile and a half off, Julie goes into premature labor with no one to help her. She finds a way to deal with the agonizing pain and fear by simply looking at it as hard work. Discuss the concept of childbirth as the work women were "meant to do." Do you think this view of her role exalts or diminishes a woman?

11. When Hank arrives home to discover that Julie has given birth, there is a dramatic change in him. He lovingly tends

to his sick wife and baby, does all the chores, and, as Julie observes, "It was like Hank had got a lot older." Why do you think he is now ready to take care of his family? Do you think he is able to become strong because, for once in their marriage, Julie is in a weakened state? Or do you think the strength, faith, and gentle nurturing of his young bride have finally rubbed off on him? Is the change in Hank believable?

12. In her fevered state after childbirth, Julie is visited by her dead father in a vision and he tells her she will live and continue to work and love. How does Julie use work to get her through her grief when her baby dies? A continuous thread throughout the novel, work is always hard and necessary, sometimes ennobling, and often the only path to survival. Talk about the various functions that work serves in the novel. In our lives? What is your own view of work? If we didn't need to work for the material benefits it provides, what would its value be?

13. Novelist Robert Morgan is also a prizewinning poet, and critics have praised **Gap Creek** for its "starkly beautiful" imagery and "simple but luminous" prose. The *New York Times* Book Review says Morgan's "stripped-down and almost primitive sentences burn with the raw, lonesome pathos of Hank Williams's best songs." What do you think of Morgan's writing style? Can you think of any other fictional characters -- in novels or in movies -- whom Julie reminds you of? Do you enjoy reading this kind of fiction? Why or why not?

Author Bio

Robert Morgan is the author of poetry, fiction and nonfiction, most notably his novel GAP CREEK and his biography of Daniel Boone, both of which were national bestsellers. A professor at Cornell University since 1971 and visiting writer-in-residence at half a dozen universities, his awards include Guggenheim and Rockefeller fellowships and an Academy of Arts and Letters Award for Literature. He was inducted into the North Carolina Literary Hall of Fame in 2010

Critical Praise

"Simple but heartfelt -- a wonderful book...written in graceful, unadorned language."

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Publication Date: October 2, 2000
Genres: Fiction
Paperback: 336 pages
Publisher: Touchstone
ISBN-10: 0743203631
ISBN-13: 9780743203630