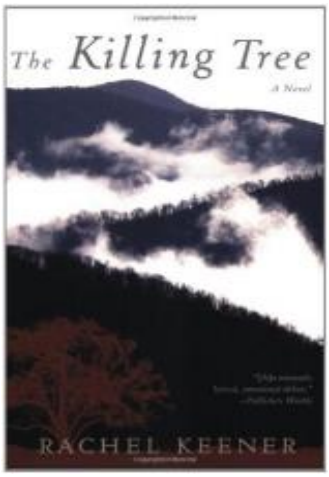
ReadingGroupGuides
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The Killing Tree

by Rachel Keener



About the Book

It's the summer after Mercy Heron graduates from high school, and she's living in the household of her domineering grandfather and a grandmother whose behavior has always been erratic --- some folks even call it crazy. They've raised Mercy since her mother died giving birth to her under the June apple tree, after Father Heron locked her out and ignored her pleas for help.

Mercy's days are spent working at the local diner, and hanging out with her wild best friend Della. Unlike Della, she's never seriously considered leaving the insulated community on Crooked Top mountain. Not until that summer when she meets Trout, a man who opens Mercy's eyes to a world beyond what she's known --- both physically and emotionally. Their relationship must be kept secret, because Father Heron won't approve of his granddaughter being involved with a migrant worker. But when Mercy tries to escape, she'll learn just how powerful, and ruthless, her grandfather can be. And the truth of her past will threaten to forever bind her to the mountain.

Discussion Guide

1. As Mercy walks through the August downpour to the Miners? Credit Union she wonders whether she looks crazy, and decides ?Sometimes crazy is just the best choice.? How is this statement true as her journey continues? In your life, has ?crazy? ever been the best choice?

2. Was Mamma Rutha a good mother figure for Mercy?

3. What did Trout mean when he said to Mercy ?Maybe what you think is all messed up, is the reason why I saw glory all over you?? Compare this to Mercy?s earlier comment about wild morning glories being ?Weeds that don?t know they?re beautiful??

4. Were you surprised to learn that Father Heron was once a beloved ?daddy? to Mary? Why do you think he locked the door?

5. Mercy spends her childhood being punished for not living up to the ?holy? standards set by Father Heron. Yet Mercy arrives at church with her ?heart full of hope,? and continues to ponder God?s design and call throughout her journey. Why is Mercy able to separate her fear and hatred for Father Heron from her feelings and questions about God?

6. Why was twelve year old Mercy so desperate for Mamma Rutha?s blessings that she was willing to give up food for two days in order to earn them back? Which hunger do you think was worse, the one for blessings or the one for food?

7. If she hadn?t gone into labor, do you think Mercy would have murdered Father Heron? If so, would that have changed your feelings towards her?

8. How do some of the characters? names further explain the characters? (Mercy, Trout, Mary) Why does Mercy call her grandmother ?Mamma Rutha? and call her grandfather ?Father Heron??

9. Father Heron says Mamma Rutha killed Mary, and Mamma Rutha says Father Heron killed her. How do you think Mary died?

10. Why did Father Heron lay Glory down under the apple tree? Did it make you feel more sympathetic towards him?

11. Della says ?Love don?t run,? while Mercy believes that love comes in many different forms. What circumstances in their lives cause them to define love the way they do? Whose definition do you agree with the most?

12. Mercy describes Crooktop ominously (?I knew that Crooktop had its fist around me.?) How is Trout?s perspective of the mountain different? Why is it different? Do you think Mercy?s relationship with Trout changed her perspective of Crooktop?

13. Did you agree with Mercy?s decision to ?be Rusty?s girl??

14. Mercy often felt alone and that she didn?t belong, despite the crowds around her. Della talked about feeling similarly, yet she ?glowed? among the crowds and behaved very differently than Mercy. Why? Who suffered more from their lack of belonging? Have you ever felt alone, despite the crowds around you? Do you hide like Mercy, or work to ?glow? like Della?

15. Why do you think the author didn?t resolve Trout?s story? What do you think the future holds for Trout? For Mercy?

Author Bio

Much of Rachel's writing is influenced by her Appalachian heritage, and her childhood spent in the mountains of Southwest Virginia and the foothills of East Tennessee. A graduate of Carson Newman College, Rachel moved to North Carolina to attend law school at Wake Forest University. It was there, during class, while her husband took notes for the both of them, that Rachel began to scribble the ideas that would become her first novel **The Killing Tree**. By the time she completed law school she had more than a degree, she had a manuscript, and finally, a clear idea of what she wanted

to be "when she grew up." Today, Rachel and her husband call the Winston-Salem area home. She spends her days being a momma to their two little boys. And at night, she writes. Visit her at http://www.rachelkeener.com.

Critical Praise

"An Appalachian coming-of-age novel...an intensely lyrical, emotional debut...Keener's vivid imagery and lush, folksy language evoke traditions...the novel succeeds in bringing to life a slice of mountain life where old and new, foreign and native, real and imagined, poetic and mundane blend against a harsh and beautiful landscape."

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