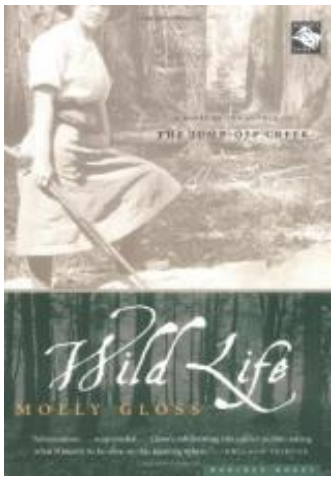
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Wild Life

by Molly Gloss



About the Book

In her highly original new novel, Molly Gloss delivers a rare blend of "heady cerebral satisfactions, gorgeous prose, and page-turning adventure" (Karen Joy Fowler). Set among lava sinkholes and logging camps at the fringe of the Northwest frontier in the early 1900s, **Wild Life** charts the life ? both real and imagined ? of the free-thinking, cigar-smoking, trouser-wearing Charlotte Bridger Drummond, who pens popular women?s adventure stories. One day, when a little girl gets lost in the woods, Charlotte anxiously joins the search and embarks on an adventure all her own. With great assurance and skill, Molly Gloss quickly transforms what at first seems to be pitch-perfect historical fiction into a kind of wild and woolly mystery story, as Charlotte herself becomes lost in the dark and tangled woods and falls into the company of an elusive band of mountain giants. Putting a surprising and revitalizing feminist spin on the classic legend of Tarzan and other wild-man sagas, Gloss takes us from the wilds of the western frontier to the wilds of the human heart. "Never has there been a more authentic, persuasive, or moving evocation of this elusive legend: **Wild Life** is a masterpiece" (Kirkus Reviews).

Discussion Guide

1. In what ways ? in her behavior as a mother and her relationships with the townspeople, for example ? does Charlotte Bridger Drummond defy convention? How are the conventions that she defies similar to or different from those faced by independent women today?

2. The very first of Charlotte's diary entries that we read ? dated three months after her deepwoods adventure, and out of chronological sequence ? is, "To write, I have decided, is to be insane." How does this judgment affect our response to all that follows? In what ways, and in what contexts, do issues of sanity and insanity arise?

3. "I can amuse and digress with the best of them," Charlotte says of herself, "and have an imagination that gives way to no man." What sets her imagination apart from the imaginations of others, and how do its workings become known? If

Charlotte prizes the imagination to the extent she claims, why does she insist upon finding rational explanations for everything? How might the combination of Charlotte's "energetic imagination" and "a certain giddiness" and "relish for adventure" predispose her to her experiences in the forest?

4. With what details does Gloss provide a sense of the landscape, economy, and life of southwest Washington at the turn of the twentieth century?

5. How do the various quotations that Gloss intersperses throughout Charlotte's account illuminate the major themes of the novel or enhance our understanding of the motivations and behavior of Charlotte and other characters?

6. One of the Samuel Butler quotations reads: "When anything in [my books] is rather strange and outré, it is probably drawn straight from nature as close as I could draw it; when it is plausible, there is probably no particular and especial foundation for it." How might this comment and Charlotte's immediately following observation ? "It is a mild paradox, I suppose, that plots taken from real life often are the harder to believe" ? apply to Charlotte's writings? How might they apply to **Wild Life**?

7. To what degree have Charlotte's "necessary conditions for female emancipation" been realized? "I envision a day very soon," she wrote in 1889, "when women as a class shall be guaranteed happiness. We lack only the technology." How is this view reconciled with what Charlotte later writes of Melba: "She had little confidence and less interest in the idea of Progress, not having noticed much improvement in people's happiness with the improvement of machinery"? How have technology and "the improvement of machinery" affected women's lives over the past 110 years?

8. In a 1906 diary entry, Charlotte notes that, despite being "accustomed to thoroughly governing my own affairs and the affairs of my children" and "in those respects well content with my condition," she has never conquered loneliness. What kind of loneliness does she refer to, and what are its occasions? What is the "agony of solitariness" that Charlotte suffered after being "rescued," and how might it be related to this later loneliness?

9. How might we explain the "feeling of puniness and anxiety, which must be the human response to such supernatural forests" as the one Charlotte enters in search of Harriet? In what way are these "primeval forests" supernatural? How do Gloss's descriptions of the great forests ? and Charlotte's observation, "Of course, that is the meaning of forests, that they are wild" ? support present-day arguments for the preservation of wild places?

10. After several days lost in the deep woods, Charlotte begins to contemplate the possibility of her death and the question of life after death. To what extent are her thoughts in this regard commonplace, and to what extent exceptional? What does Charlotte learn about grief and dying and human attitudes toward grieving and the death of oneself and others?

11. In an August 1902 diary entry, Charlotte writes that "the extraordinary has an allure of its own that can transcend intellectual considerations." How might this observation apply to her own story? In what way does Charlotte's story transcend intellectual considerations? What kind of considerations take precedence over the intellectual?

12. What does Charlotte learn from her observations of the forest beasts about love, family bonds, other states of being, and civilization itself? How do her experiences with and observations of the beasts alter her view of herself and the personal qualities she once held as primarily valuable?

13. As Charlotte joins her own "warble" of mourning to that of the Mountain Giants, she observes of this single instance of alteration, "By such small increments the old lines that set me apart, that defined me, are erased." By what increments and through what stages does Charlotte adapt her behavior and outlook to those of the Mountain Giants? What does she learn or acquire, and what does she lose or forget at each stage? Which is the more important, what she acquires or what she leaves behind?

14. Returning with Horace Stuband to the Island, Charlotte considers that "the conquest of the natural world has been the ruling passion of this modern society." What evidence of this "ruling passion" appears in the novel? How close has the country come to being "emptied of the last of its mysteries"? Why should we be concerned that "the connection between ourselves and the wild world [might be] irrevocably broken"?

15. What is the message conveyed by the final excerpt from "Tatoosh" about the Bearded Man? How do you interpret the statement that "the Bearded Man had cut the cord between himself and the world and now stood separate in his victory, like an embryo which has triumphed over its womb"? What are the implications of the novel's final sentences ? "In the Moon When Tight Buds Unfurl, Wolverine found a lost child belonging to the Bearded Man and brought this child to us. We have been keeping it safe"?

Author Bio

Molly Gloss is the author of four novels and numerous short stories, yet she didn't start writing seriously until she was thirty-five. Born and raised in Portland, Oregon, Gloss confesses that she has always liked to write but that she "grew up in a period when smart girls were encouraged to be teachers or nurses. Nobody ever told me I could be a writer." After the birth of her son and a rocky adjustment period that yielded what she called a "desperate journal," Gloss enrolled in a writing class taught by Ursula K. Le Guin at Portland State University ? an experience she called "life-altering." Her first book, **Outside the Gates**, was a young, adult fantasy that grew out of a short story written for her son. Her second novel, **The Jump-Off Creek**, was the winner of the Oregon Book Award, and the Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award for Fiction and a finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award. She then published **The Dazzle of Day**, a foray into science fiction, which was named a New York Times Notable Book and received the PEN Center U.S.A. West Award for Fiction. Gloss is also the recipient of a Whiting Writer's Award.**Wild Life**, her fourth novel, was recently awarded the James Tiptree Award for literary fantasy. Gloss teaches writing and literature of the American West at Portland State University and lives in Portland, Oregon.

Critical Praise

"Extraordinary . . . a majestic evocation of the Pacific Northwest, in which elements of feminism, tall tales, the nature of the creative process, and the bottomless magic of the American wilderness are expertly woven into one exquisite artifact,

a glowing gift to the reader."

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