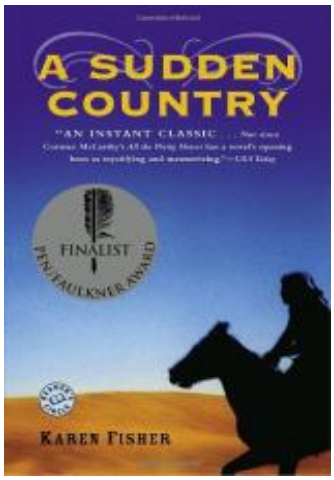
A Sudden Country

by Karen Fisher



About the Book

A vivid and revelatory novel based on actual events of the 1847 Oregon migration, **A Sudden Country** follows two characters of remarkable complexity and strength in a journey of survival and redemption.

James MacLaren, once a resourceful and ambitious Hudson's Bay Company trader, has renounced his aspirations for a quiet family life in the Bitterroot wilderness. Yet his life is overturned in the winter of 1846, when his Nez Perce wife deserts him and his children die of smallpox. In the grip of a profound sorrow, MacLaren, whose home once spanned a continent, sets out to find his wife. But an act of secret vengeance changes his course, introducing him to a different wife and mother: Lucy Mitchell, journeying westward with her family.

Lucy, a remarried widow, careful mother, and reluctant emigrant, is drawn at once to the self-possessed MacLaren. Convinced that he is the key to her family's safe passage, she persuades her husband to employ him. As their hidden stories and obsessions unfold, and pasts and cultures collide, both Lucy and MacLaren must confront the people they have truly been, are, and may become.

Alive with incident and insight, presenting with rare scope and intimacy the complex relations among nineteenth-century traders, immigrants, and Native Americans, **A Sudden Country** is, above all, a heroic and unforgettable story of love and loss, sacrifice and understanding.

Discussion Guide

1. One of America's foundational myths, the mid-nineteenth-century migration to Oregon and California, has often been misrepresented or romanticized. What popular impressions does Fisher strive to correct in her account of this journey? Does the character of Lucy Mitchell in **A Sudden Country** conform to the typical representation of a pioneer woman? Does MacLaren fit the popular notion of the "mountain man"? What elements of Fisher's re-envisioning most surprised you?

2. How does the Mitchells' first meeting with MacLaren on the night of the storm (pp. 48?53) reveal, in miniature, the complex dynamics that will come to shape the story of this group together?

3. When MacLaren arrives to join the company at last, Lucy asks him why he came (p. 90), and he responds by asking her the same question. Does either person seem to understand why each has sought the other? Which of their unconnected or unconscious responses might offer clues?

4. In the early chapter "A True Wife," what do we learn about Lucy's aesthetics and attitudes that might help explain the isolation she later feels among the other women of her party? Later, she observes: "And now, if some believed her strange and some believed her silent, if some believed her mean with her affections, it was not because she thought she was better than they were. It was because she did not trust that she was anyone at all"

(pp. 133?134). Do you think this loss of confidence is typical of middle age, or has Lucy suffered a kind of erasure of identity particular to her?

5. Israel's decision to take his family west, and Lucy's reluctance to go, bring into focus their sharply different attitudes toward the relative benefits of risk and safety.To what degree is either of them able to see the other's position or question his or her own? At what points in the story do Israel and Lucy appear to bend somewhat toward the other's view?

6. How do certain inanimate objects, like the teacups, the corset and the man's saddle Lucy rides in, all serve to symbolize the transforming power of this westward journey?

7. Is Israel or MacLaren the more virtuous man, in Lucy's view? Do you agree? For which man do you have more sympathy? Is the sympathy of others earned by virtue, or by something else? If earned by something else, then what?

8. Do your impressions of Native American culture agree with any of the varied (and sometimes contradictory) pictures of the individuals and tribes represented in **A Sudden Country**? Were you surprised by any of Fisher's depictions?

9. While among the Pawnee, Lucy asks MacLaren, "With what morality do they temper their desires?" and accuses the Pawnee of being shameless, of doing what they please (p. 114).MacLaren has suffered equal disdain in native societies that see whites as people who "roam without reason, claiming things that could not be owned" (p. 115). Do the moralities of different cultures seem purely arbitrary? Why have neither of the moral notions cited here (the goodness of Victorian restraint, and the goodness of intransient communities and common ownership) survived in this country to the present day?

10. **A Sudden Country** portrays love and marriage in many lights. In Lucy's eyes,what is love, and how far should it affect one's actions? How did her expectations and experiences of love differ with Luther, Israel, and MacLaren? What does she conclude at last? Do you believe her? Do you agree?

11. Lise is an elusive character in the novel. How and why does MacLaren's perception of her, and of the nature of their relationship, change over the course of his journey?

12. Do you agree with MacLaren's intuition, that the "borrowed genius" (p. 302) of the Christian faith has done more than anything to free Europeans from the bonds of geography and community, and to make them a "wandering and conquering" people? What evidence comes to mind to support or refute this idea?

13. Early in **A Sudden Country**, Laurent warns that all the evils of the world spring from sorrow.Toward the end, Eliza Spalding maintains that "no good comes from fear.No morality is governed by it" (p. 343).Her assertion that we "must live by Him in love, and in the knowledge that our selfish actions oft prove fatal," is an attitude that MacLaren has dismissed already as "blind charity," though his own worst actions could easily be read as proofs of her conviction.Why does he come to believe that Laurent's answer is the right one? Is it too simple an answer, or brilliant in its simplicity? What, as MacLaren understands it, is the "solution" to sorrow?

14. Do Americans act in the world today much as they did in 1847, or are their actions and ambitions significantly different?

Author Bio

Karen Fisher has lived in the West as a teacher, wrangler, farmer, and carpenter. She now lives with her husband and their three children on an island in the Puget Sound.

Critical Praise

"A splendid novel, rendering a past era of America with resonant clarity and unfolding an achingly human story. Fisher also has a distinctively lovely narrative voice. This is a very impressive debut from a writer I will be delighted to follow in the years to come."

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