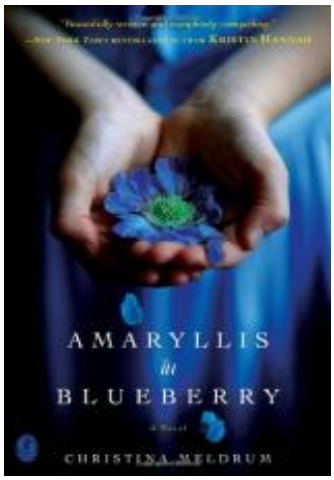
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Amaryllis in Blueberry

by Christina Meldrum



About the Book

In the stirring tradition of **The Secret Life of Bees** and **The Poisonwood Bible**, **Amaryllis in Blueberry** explores the complexity of human relationships set against an unforgettable backdrop. Told through the haunting voices of Dick and Seena Slepy and their four daughters, Christina Meldrum's soulful novel weaves together the past and the present of a family harmed --- and healed --- by buried secrets.

"Maybe, unlike hope, truth couldn't be contained in a jar?"

Meet the Slepys: Dick, the stern doctor, the naÏve husband, a man devoted to both facts and faith; Seena, the storyteller, the restless wife, a mother of four, a lover of myth. And their children, the Marys: Mary Grace, the devastating beauty; Mary Tessa, the insistent inquisitor; Mary Catherine, the saintly, lost soul; and finally, Amaryllis, Seena's unspoken favorite, born with the mystifying ability to sense the future, touch the past, and distinguish the truth tellers from the most convincing liar of all.

When Dick insists his family move from Michigan to the unfamiliar world of Africa for missionary work, he can't possibly foresee how this new land and its people will entrance and change his daughters --- and himself --- forever.

Nor can he predict how Africa will spur his wife Seena toward an old but unforgotten obsession. In fact, Seena may be falling into a trance of her own?

Discussion Guide

1. Amaryllis in Blueberry is told from the viewpoints of Seena, Dick, their four daughters, their neighbor Clara, and finally the priest Heimdall. How do the varied perspectives affect you as a reader? The final chapter is the only one told from Heimdall Amadi's perspective. Why do you suppose the author chose to give him the last word?

2. Consider how truth and reality are portrayed in the novel. What besides individual perspective contributes to each character's view of truth and reality?

3. What are your thoughts on the narrative structure of the novel, which begins with The End --- Seena on trial for murder --- and intertwines scenes from the past and present? How does knowing about Dick's death at the beginning of the novel affect your perception of him throughout the book? How does it affect your view of the other characters, particularly Seena and Yllis? If the story had been told in a more linear fashion, do you think you would have felt differently about the story and/or the characters?

4. Consider the significance of storytelling and myth-making in the novel. The author interweaves Greek mythology, African mythology and Catholic doctrine into the storyline of **Amaryllis in Blueberry**. How are these myths/faiths similar? What purpose do they serve? How does religion relate to storytelling and myth-making in the novel?

5. The title refers to a Greek myth --- the myth of Amaryllis, and Seena summarizes the myth on page 310. What parallels do you see between the myth of Amaryllis and Yllis's story? In chapter two, Seena explains the myth of Pandora (pages 15-17). What parallels do you see between the myth of Pandora and the novel's characters, story and structure?

6. Yllis is the only character who tells her story in past tense. Why do you think the author chose to give Yllis this unique perspective? Although Dick, Seena, the Marys, Clara and Heimdall all tell their stories in the present tense, each looks back on past events. How do you think their present circumstances impact their memory of those past events? How does their memory of these events impact their sense of the present?

7. Discuss the role of religion in the novel. What drives Dick's strong Catholic faith, including his affinity for the Virgin Mary? Mary Catherine says, "seeing God, believing in Jesus, is like believing in air" (page 51). How does Mary Catherine use religion to construct her identity? How does Dick? How do their experiences in Africa challenge their self-perceptions?

8. Compare the two different settings portrayed in the novel, Michigan and West Africa. For the various members of the Slepy family, how are their expectations of Africa different from the reality they encounter? How does each setting affect the way each character constructs his/her sense of identity and reality?

9. What role does names and naming play in the novel? Yllis in not a Mary. Tessa, Grace and Catie all share the name Mary. Seena does not use her given name, Christina --- except when Dick insists on calling her Christina. Each of the girls receives a West African day name. Mawuli's name has meaning. Addae's name has meaning. Are the characters empowered by their names? Confined? Do any of the characters use naming either to empower or to disempower others?

10. "How can you live with someone for years...and see only your imagination reflected?" wonders Seena (page 3). Seena's comment suggests she came to realize her perception of Dick was built on imagination --- on myth. Was it? Seena claims she never loved Dick, but do you think she did? Does he love her? To what degree are Heimdall, Seena's

daughters and Clara also Seena's "imagination reflected"? What role does imagination play in the formation, nourishment and/or undermining of the other relationships in the novel?

11. Is the "Day of the Snake" (page 86) a turning point in the life of each of the Slepys? Seena seems to think it may be, but is Seena's perception of the announcement's significance fueled by her own needs? Is this another moment when Seena sees only her "imagination reflected"? Do you think a single statement can have the power to irrevocably alter the course of people's lives?

12. Obsession affects several of the characters in **Amaryllis in Blueberry**. Why is Dick obsessed with Seena? Why does Seena become "Seena the Stalker"? Is Mawuli merely a replacement for Mary Catherine's lost obsession, her faith? How important is the theme of secrecy in the novel, and why?

13. What are Seena's strengths and weaknesses as a mother? How does your perception of her as a mother affect your view of her as a person? How does each of her children see her? In what ways is Seena's relationship with Yllis different from her relationship with her other daughters?

14. What are Dick's strengths and weaknesses as a father? As a husband? As a human being?

15. What is the significance of Yllis being a synesthete? In a sense, her gift results in her "carrying the sins of the world," given she is the recipient of others' unspoken confessions. And in the end, it is she who sacrifices her innocence to save her mother. Do you think the author intended to make a parallel between Yllis and Father Amadi? Yllis and Christ? What other metaphors or symbolism do you detect in the novel?

16. "Grace isn't the same. That Dipo meant something to her. Standing before all those people, stripped inside and out, she found something inside herself she forgot she had" (page 315). What reaction did you have to the Dipo ceremony? Do you think it has redeeming cultural value? Why do you think it is important to Grace? Does the Dipo ceremony make you reflect at all on our own cultural practices related to puberty and youth coming-of-age?

17. Why do you think Mary Catherine is drawn to Father Amadi? Why do you think she cuts herself and starves herself? Is it merely a plea for attention, as Seena suggests at one point? Is it possible Mary Catherine knows more about the relationship between Father Amadi and Seena than she is able to admit?

18. Tessa's family regards her as a "trouble-maker," and even Yllis says Tessa is "good at sick. And cruel" (page 14). Yet in many respects, Tessa is more sensitive to and affected by both the joys and sorrows of life in Africa than anyone else in her family. How is this seeming sensitivity consistent with her family's perception of her? How is it consistent with her perception of herself?

19. What role does Clara play in the novel? She is not part of the Slepy family, yet she still has a voice in the novel. Why?

20. Now that you know the novel's ending --- that Yllis killed Dick --- what new insights does it give you into the story and the characters, particularly Yllis? Would your foreknowledge of this and other events --- particularly the true circumstances of Yllis's birth and Mary Catherine's meeting with Father Amadi --- have altered your perception of the events themselves? How do you think a second reading of this novel would affect you?

Author Bio

Christina Meldrum received her Bachelor of Arts in religious studies and political science from the University of Michigan. After working in grassroots development in Africa, she earned her Juris Doctor from Harvard Law School. She has worked for the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva, Switzerland, and as a litigator at the law firm of Shearman & Sterling. She currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her family and is on the advisory board of Women of the World Investments. MADAPPLE is her first novel.

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Critical Praise

"A gripping and satisfying read. First you'll race to the end, then you'll tell everyone you know to read it--partly for their benefit, partly so you'll be able to talk about it with someone."

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