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Big Stone Gap

by Adriana Trigiani



About the Book

In the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, the tiny town of **Big Stone Gap** is home to some of the most charming eccentrics in the state. Ave Maria Mulligan is the town's self-proclaimed spinster, a thirty-five year old pharmacist with a "mountain girl's body and a flat behind." She lives an amiable life with good friends and lots of hobbies until the fateful day in 1978 when she suddenly discovers that she's not who she always thought she was. Before she can blink, Ave's fielding marriage proposals, fighting off greedy family members, organizing a celebration for visiting celebrities, and planning the trip of a lifetime?a trip that could change her view of the world and her own place in it forever. Brimming with humor and wise notions of small-town life, **Big Stone Gap** is a gem of a book with a giant heart. . . .

Discussion Guide

1. Why do you think the author set **Big Stone Gap** during the late 1970s instead of today?

2. The coal mines are the site of danger and oppressiveness, while the caverns Ave Maria and Theodore visit reveal the beauty hidden deep in the earth. How does this dichotomy reflect Ave Maria's inner world during her yearlong crisis?

3. As the novel progresses and Ave Maria learns more about herself and her past, her feelings for Big Stone Gap change from contentment to disassociation to joy. Have your feelings for your hometown changed as you've changed? How?

4. Ave Maria refers to herself as a "ferriner," but when she visits Italy she realizes that her home is in Big Stone Gap. What other works have you read in which the hero or heroine must travel to find his or her home in the world?

5. Ave Maria's description of some events, such as kissing Theodore after the Drama and Jack Mac's reaction to her gratitude for bringing over her Italian family, differs from other people's perspectives. Do you believe Ave Maria's interpretations? Why or why not?

6. Theodore and Ave Maria have romantic feelings for each other, but never at the same time. If their feelings had been more coordinated, do you think they would have entered a lasting marriage? Do you think their 'best friend' relationship will endure after Ave Maria and Jack Mac's wedding?

7. When did you suspect that Ave Maria would fall in love with Jack Mac? What were the clues that the author left?

8. Jack Mac tells Ave Maria, "Stop thinking." Is Jack Mac correct? Does too much thinking lead Ave Maria into making the wrong choices? Are her emotions a trustier guide or equally unreliable?

9. A common theme in literature is that the heroine (e.g., Snow White, Cinderella, Jane Eyre, Nancy Drew) must lose a parent or parents before she is free to discover who she really is. Is this merely a literary convention or does it have roots in real life? Does it apply to male characters as well? How much significance does Mrs. Mac's death have to Jack Mac's personal development?

10. Ave Maria feels relief and not much surprise when she learns Fred Mulligan is not her father, and later she recognizes aspects of herself in Mario. Though Fred is not her blood kin, what traits did he pass on to Ave Maria while he raised her? How much of Ave Maria's personality was shaped by nature and how much by nurture?

11. When describing her friend Iva Lou, the majorette Tayloe, and Sweet Sue, Ave Maria focuses on the power of beauty and desirability, but she also cautions Pearl that beauty fades while character endures. How does Pearl synthesize the importance of character with the force of beauty?

12. Both Ave Maria and Worley discover their fathers aren't who they thought they were, but Worley learns of his true parentage when his father is still alive. Do you think Ave Maria's expectations of love and marriage would have been affected if she had learned the truth about Mario before her mother died? How?

13. Ave Maria is named for the mysterious woman who took Ave Maria's mother under her wing. Do you see another meaning in Ave Maria's name? Does it tie in with her developing belief in destiny and faith?

14. Big Cherry Holler, Adriana Trigiani's next novel about the people of Big Stone Gap, jumps forward eight years into Ave Maria and Jack Mac's marriage. Knowing these two characters as you do, do you expect the path of true to love run smooth for them? What quirks do Ave Maria and Jack Mac bring to the relationship that could cause bumps or, conversely, even out the way?

Author Bio

Adriana Trigiani is the *New York Times* bestselling author of 21 books of fiction and nonfiction. Her work has been published in 38 languages around the world. An award-winning playwright, television writer/producer, and filmmaker, Trigiani wrote and directed the major motion picture of her debut novel, BIG STONE GAP; adapted her novel, VERY

VALENTINE, for television; and directed the documentary, *Queens of the Big Time*, among others.

In 2023, President Sergio Matterella of Italy awarded Trigiani the *Cavaliere dell?Ordine della Stella d?Italia*. The Library of Virginia bestowed their highest honor, the *Patron of Letters* degree, to Trigiani in 2024. She received the 2025 Ellis Island Medal of Honor for her significant contributions to literature, culture, and communicty.

Trigiani grew up in Appalachia, in the mountains of Virginia, where she co-founded The Origin Project, a year-round, in-school writing program that has served over 25,000 students since its inception in 2014. Trigiani is proud to serve on the New York State Council on the Arts. She lives in Greenwich Village with her family.

Critical Praise

"Charming . . . Readers would do well to fall into the nearest easy chair and savor the story."--- *USA Today*"Delightfully quirky . . . chock-full of engaging, oddball characters and unexpected plot twists, this Gap is meant to be crossed."--- *People* (Book of the Week)"As comforting as a mug of chamomile tea on a rainy Sunday."--- *The New York Times Book Review*"A touching tale of a sleepy Southern town and a young woman on the brink of self-discovery and acceptance."--- *Southern Living*"Ave Maria's spunky attitude, sardonic wit, and extravagant generosity compel you into her fan club . . . . Delightfully entertaining."--- *Tampa Tribune*"A delightful tale of intimate community life [where] the characters are as real as the ones who live next door."--- *Sunday Oklahoman*"In a sassy Southern voice, [Trigiani] creates honest, endearingly original characters."--- *Glamour*

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