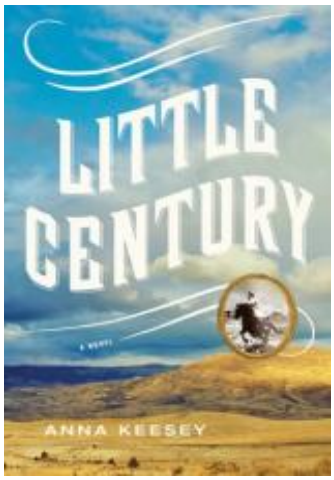
Little Century

by Anna Keesey



About the Book

In a resonant voice that calls to mind Willa Cather?s Midwest classics and Denis Johnson?s **Train Dreams**, Anna Keesey?s **Little Century** takes us to a haunting frontier landscape, evoking its characters? emotional landscapes as well in finely honed prose.

Near the turn of the last century, eighteen-year-old Esther Chambers travels west alone, leaving behind the vibrant world of Chicago after the death of her mother. In search of her only living relative, Esther journeys to the lawless frontier town of Century, Oregon, where she?s met by her distant cousin, a laconic cattle rancher named Ferris Pickett. Plotting to expand his already impressive ranch, Pick helps Esther establish herself as a homesteader by a small lake called Half-a-Mind.

The tranquil acreage belies a bloody range war in which ranchers vie for land and water. Esther is soon forced to choose between Pick and Ben Cruff, a gentle sheepherder who has become the sworn enemy of the cattle ranchers.

Charting both the exuberance and the violent greed of the American quest for expansion, **Little Century** maps our country?s defining spirit through the eyes of a young female survivor. We hope that the following guide will enhance your reading group?s experience of this moving portrait of history and humanity.

Discussion Guide

1. Discuss the setting of frontier Oregon as if it were a character: Is it seductive, comforting, dangerous? How does Esther?s perception of it change throughout the novel?

2. What did Esther?s mother teach her about survival? How did being raised by a woman affect Esther?s sense of self?

3. When Pick takes Esther to Mr. Grist so that she can claim the homestead near Half-a-Mind, what do his actions say about the history of America?s expansion in the Pacific Northwest, and about humanity?s approach to natural resources such as water?

4. What motivates Pick to be a rancher? Is he in it for the power or is he simply attached to the land? What separates him from the buckaroos? How is his relationship to the land different from Esther?s or Ben?s?

5. How is Esther shaped by her talent as a woman of words: a diary writer, typist, typesetter, court reporter, journalist?

6. What gives Jane and Violet authority in their community? What did Jane?s secret past predict about her future? Ultimately, were her actions heroic or shameful?

7. Would you have chosen Pick or Ben? Discuss the differences between rancher and shepherd as they play out in *Little Century.*

8. How is the story line affected by the major events of the time period, especially the railroad expansion and America?s intervention in the Philippines during the Spanish-American War? How do these events reflect the greed that spurs Century?s range war?

9. How do Esther?s memories of Chicago compare with her life on the frontier? What freedoms and constraints does she experience in each place?

10. Is Delores?s ancestry the sole reason Pick rejects her and Marguerite? How does Esther help him understand his place in Delores and Marguerite?s world?

11. The novel?s animals?sheep, horses, and cats in particular?play important roles. How do their needs and instincts compare with those of humans?

12. Why is Esther concerned enough?even more so than the coroner?to uncover the truth about Joe?s death?

13. The author writes of the ?net of cousins? comprising all creatures, in which friend and foe, hunter and hunted, are ultimately related. What prevents humanity from functioning as a generous, vast family?

14. Discuss the closing images of Esther: What were her greatest sources of fulfillment in life?

Author Bio

Anna Keesey is a graduate of Stanford University and of the Iowa Writers? Workshop. Her work has appeared in a number of journals and anthologies, including **Best American Short Stories**. She is the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Creative Writing Fellowship and has held residencies at MacDowell, Bread Loaf, Yaddo, and Provincetown. Keesey teaches English and creative writing at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon.

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