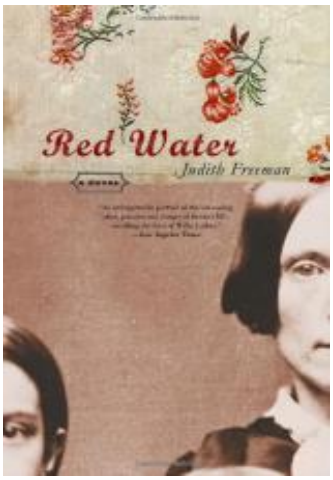
Red Water

by Judith Freeman



About the Book

"**Red Water** takes you into a territory and culture that will haunt you long after the last page is turned. The story is fascinating, the language and style is incredible, and the characters are as varied and memorable as a Utah sunset. Judith Freeman proves once again that she is as gifted a writer as we have in this country."

?James Welch, author of **Fools Crow**

Discussion Guide

1. Red Water gives us a look at polygamy from inside a Mormon family with eight present wives. How does religion, the husband, and each woman herself define and justify polygamy? Do the women's views change through the course of the novel? What traditional notions of polygamy and Mormonism are confirmed and/or challenged?

2. At the core of the novel is the female community that forms among the wives of John D. Lee, "Father" as he requests Emma to call him. The women created "a gaggle of geese following our gander wherever he led us." Yet he couldn't completely control the women, and without him in their presence, the bonds fall apart among all except Emma and Ann. What is their relationship?mother/daughter, sisters, friends, lovers, equals? Why is it strong even after fate moves them in different directions?

3. Each wife has a different relationship with John. What binds the women to their husband? Do the events of the novel change these ties? Does being married to John stifle or nurture the women?

4. What is the relationship between the Mormon settlers and the Indians? According to Emma, the Indians "knew the Mormons were their friends and that the Americans were not because we told them this was so." Do you believe the first part of the sentence? Does Emma? What is John's role as "Farmer to the Indians"? Why does he occasionally dress up in

buckskin and paint his face dark? Do you think John is truly sympathetic to the Indians?

5. Regarding the Indians, Emma states, "Generally speaking, the women fared better than the men." Why? Could Emma also be talking about John's wives? How do each of the women view the Indians? Are they open, hospitable, patronizing, cruel?

6. From England, Emma brings one book, **An Encyclopedia of Greek Mythology**, and carries it as she journeys west and moves from one settlement to another. Why does the author choose this book? Why does John forbid her to read this book? What other books are present in **Red Water**? What is the significance of the lack of literature in the community?

7. The premise of Hendrik Ibsen's **A Doll's House** (1879) is its concern for the basis of human relationships. The play questions whether duties to husband and child are more sacred than duties to oneself. In **Red Water**, set at the same time, Ann leaves both her husband and children to remain true to herself and follow her intention to have many adventures. How do you answer this question regarding responsibilities to oneself and others that Ibsen and Freeman pose?

8. In mid-nineteenth-century Mormon society, gender roles are clearly differentiated and defined. How is Emma able to follow them yet still find strength and independence? How does Ann transcend these traditions and survive? What is the significance of her wearing trousers and cutting her hair, traveling solo, living unmarried with Beezer? Is she a modern protagonist? Are both women feminists, believing in the equality of men and women? Is Rachel?

9. Early in the novel, Emma has an aside where she addresses her narration, "I wish for there to be a record of the truth.... I must be a witness to the events of the past." Do you believe her narration? Is her story objective or subjective? Does she have a strong authorial voice? Do you trust the narrations of Ann and Rachel? Are they credible?

10. Does the way the women tell their stories influence you in any way? Emma's is a personal narrative, Ann's is told by a third voice, Rachel's is diary entries. Which wife do you most identify with or admire? Do their personalities and adventures sway you or the manner in which Freeman tells their stories? Why does the novel end with Rachel? Is there a significance to the order?

11. Freeman captures the early Mormons as they journey westward attempting to establish "a community of equals in God." This community quickly establishes classes and levels of Mormons, the rich and the poor, those more blessed and closer to God (and Brigham Young) and those not. Where does John fit in this hierarchy? Where do the women stand? Is it basic human nature to form hierarchies within a community, as George Orwell brilliantly shows us in **Animal Farm**? Rachel states that "the only true subject of men's intercourse is the subject of power" and that all lives are "composed of such interplays." Would Emma and Ann agree with this? Do you? Give some examples of the various gender, class, race power plays acted out in this novel.

12. There is a phrase in the Book of Mormon?"it is better that one man should perish than a whole nation dwindle in unbelief"?that Freeman paraphrases in **Red Water** to explain Brigham Young's sacrificing (and scapegoating) of John D. Lee. It is this belief that allows John to die without fighting and without "putting the saddle on the right horse," as Ann and Rachel both phrase it. What do you think of this belief? Do you agree with it at all?

13. Through all of Ann's adventures, "she had known the goodness in the world and she had also known the depravity,

often resident within the same man, and she knew that what could live in one man could easily live within another, given a small turn of fate." Of the three women, she gives the broadest portrait of John?his warmth and kindness as well as his dishonesty and brutality. She loved and then deserted him, and recognized why he had to die. John was scapegoated for the massacre, yet he did have a role in it. Do you believe he is a protagonist or antagonist in this story? Who is the real villain? Is there any?

14. Red Water revolves around the Mountain Meadow Massacre that disrupts and changes the lives of John, his wives, and the Mormon community at large. Was any lesson learned from the massacre and John's subsequent death? Or did the execution simply provide justice and quiet the horrified masses?

15. The landscape is a vibrant character in the novel. What role does it play besides providing the backdrop for the adventures and relationships that occur? What struggles with the harsh environment do John and the women have to endure? What are the different relationships between the three women and nature? Do they interact with it, overcome it, or are they beaten by it?

16. Red, the color, permeates the entire novel?red hills, mountains, plains; red mules; red men; red earth, which seasonally colors the river red. What does red imply in the novel? Why the inserted epigraph from C. K. Chesterton? Why the title **Red Water**? Why not Red Rocks or Red Earth? What is the significance of water?

Author Bio

Judith Freeman is the author of five novels (MacARTHUR PARK, RED WATER, THE CHINCHILLA FARM, SET FOR LIFE and A DESERT OF PURE FEELING), a collection of stories (FAMILY ATTRACTIONS), a biography of Raymond Chandler (THE LONG EMBRACE) and a memoir (THE LATTER DAYS). She lives in California and Idaho.

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