

# The Bones of Paradise

by Jonis Agee

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## About the Book

**The award-winning author of *THE RIVER WIFE* returns with a multi-generational family saga, set in the unforgiving Nebraska Sandhills in the years following the massacre at Wounded Knee --- an ambitious tale of history, vengeance, race, guilt, betrayal, family and belonging, filled with a vivid cast of characters shaped by violence, love and a desperate loyalty to the land.**

**?A gifted poet of that dark lushness in the heart of the American landscape.??New York Times Book Review**

Ten years after the 7th Cavalry massacred more than 200 Lakota men, women, and children at Wounded Knee, J. B. Bennett, a white rancher, and Star, a young Native American woman, are murdered in a remote meadow on J. B.'s land. The deaths bring together the scattered members of the Bennett family: his cunning and hard father, Drum; his estranged wife, Dulcinea; and his young sons, Cullen and Hayward. As the mystery of these twin deaths unfolds, the history of the dysfunctional Bennett's and their damning secrets are revealed --- exposing the conflicted heart of a nation caught between past and future.

At the center of *THE BONES OF PARADISE* are two remarkable women. Dulcinea, returned after bitter years of self-exile, yearns for redemption and the courage to mend her broken family and reclaim the land that is rightfully hers. Rose, scarred by the terrible slaughters that have decimated and dislocated her people, struggles to accept the death of her sister, Star, and refuses to rest until she is avenged.

A kaleidoscopic portrait of misfits, schemers, chancers and dreamers, Jonis Agee's bold new novel is a panorama of America at the dawn of a new century. A beautiful evocation of this magnificent, blood-soaked land --- its sweeping prairies, seas of golden grass and sandy hills, all at the mercy of two unpredictable and terrifying forces, weather and lawlessness --- and the durable men and women who dared to tame it. Intimate and epic, *THE BONES OF PARADISE* is a remarkable achievement: a mystery, a tragedy, a romance, and an unflagging exploration of the beauty and brutality,

tenderness and cruelty that defined the settling of the American west.

## Discussion Guide

1. *THE BONES OF PARADISE* takes place 10 years after the massacre at Wounded Knee. Did you know anything about that period in history before picking up the book? How did Jonis Agee's brutal description of the scene change your impression of the events that transpired there?
2. Agee certainly sets the stage for a slow-to-boil mystery. Two dead bodies. A shooter in the hills. Little clue about who's behind the slaughter. At which point in the book did you form a conclusion about who was responsible for the murders? Did that change throughout the novel? Were you surprised by the truth when it came to light?
3. It's clear that Dulcinea and J.B. loved each other, but were driven apart by a tyrant father. Put yourself in Dulcinea's or J.B.'s shoes. Would you have agreed to his bidding? Why or why not?
4. Drum Bennett is a nasty old man. Were you surprised when you learned about his secret past? Did it make you feel any different toward him, or help you understand his actions? How did your opinion of him change at the end of the novel?
5. The author plays with perspective throughout *THE BONES OF PARADISE*. At times she's an unreliable narrator. Do you think this is an effective way to tell the story? Why or why not?
6. *THE BONES OF PARADISE* jumps back and forth in time, from the exact moment of J.B.'s murder to the Wounded Knee massacre and the story of J.B. and Dulcinea's courtship, to Drum Bennett's past. What effect do you think it has on the reading experience? Did you like the back-and-forth, or would you have preferred a more linear telling?
7. To read about the massacre at Wounded Knee is to know and understand our inherited guilt for treating Native Americans like savages and taking their land. What emotions came up for you when reading those chapters?
8. J.B. witnesses Wounded Knee firsthand, yet continues to live on his ranch "as if he's renting it." Does this also make him culpable? Why or why not?
9. For most of the novel, it's clear that the women are faultless. The men, on the other hand, are another story. What were your thoughts about Chance, Graver, and the two Bennett boys at the beginning of the novel, and how did your perceptions evolve as the story progressed?
10. In one of the novel's flashbacks, J.B. visits the Pine Ridge Reservation and talks with "Indians who spoke only of living in peace with creation again, without war and hunger, a world where their children could return to their families and be raised in the traditional ways in harmony with the animals and all people." He describes it as "a Christian vision without hell and damnation." If such was the case, what was the reason for the Wounded Knee massacre, in your opinion? Do you think such a vision was possible then? How about now?
11. After the land grab for mineral and oil rights is introduced, Dulcinea has a dilemma on her hands. She can sell the ranch and be free of all the hassle, but she doesn't. This is a common threat facing many ranchers today. Do you think

that it's right for ranchers to withhold the oil or mineral rights to their land? What would you have done if you were in Dulcinea's place?

**12.** Cullen is such an interesting character. He's angry and rash, yet he was basically given up by his father and abandoned by his mother as a child, at least from his perspective. How responsible are his parents for the way he turned out? Was there a way for him to turn out differently?

**13.** The finale is a scene ripped straight out of an old Western movie. It's filled with twists and turns, and a shocking climax and resolution. Do you think the ending did the novel justice? If you were the author, how would you have written the denouement differently? The finale?

**14.** What do you make of the book's title? Is it fitting? Why or why not?

## Author Bio

Jonis Agee has been praised by the *New York Times Book Review* as "a gifted poet of that dark lushness in the heart of the American landscape." She is the award-winning author of 12 books, including the *New York Times* Notable Books of the Year *SWEET EYES* and *STRANGE ANGELS*. Her awards include the John Gardner Fiction Award, the George Garrett Award, a National Endowment for the Arts grant in fiction, a Loft-McKnight Award, a Loft-McKnight Award of Distinction, and two Nebraska Book Awards. A native of Nebraska, Agee teaches at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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