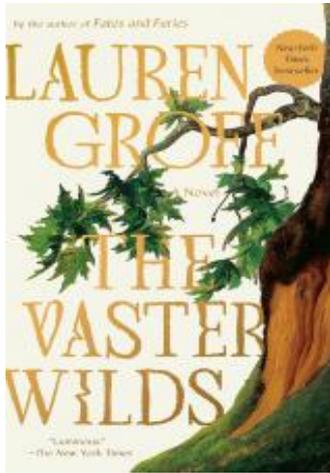


The Vaster Wilds

by Lauren Groff



About the Book

A taut and electrifying novel from celebrated bestselling author Lauren Groff, about one spirited girl alone in the wilderness, trying to survive.

A servant girl escapes from a colonial settlement in the wilderness. She carries nothing with her but her wits, a few possessions, and the spark of god that burns hot within her. What she finds in this terra incognita is beyond the limits of her imagination and will bend her belief in everything that her own civilization has taught her.

Lauren Groff's novel is at once a thrilling adventure story and a penetrating fable about trying to find a new way of living in a world succumbing to the churn of colonialism. *THE VASTER WILDS* is a work of raw and prophetic power that tells the story of America in miniature, through one girl at a hinge point in history, to ask how --- and if --- we can adapt quickly enough to save ourselves.

Discussion Guide

1. *THE VASTER WILDS* is, among other things, a survival story, and survival narratives have a long history in Western culture --- from classics like *ROBINSON CRUSOE* to popular American children's books such as *MY SIDE OF THE MOUNTAIN* and *HATCHET* to more contemporary nonfiction, including *INTO THE WILD* and reality TV like "Naked and Afraid" and "Alone." How is Groff's novel in conversation with American mythology about survival, and how does it dispel those myths?

2. The female protagonist escapes a colonial Virginia settlement where people are starving and many are dying. In the wilderness, the girl encounters Indigenous people who have a profoundly different way of life. What does she learn about the contrast between the European and Indigenous perspectives on the land, culture and survival? How does she embody certain prejudices of her era, and in what ways does she surmount them?
3. The novel portrays the girl's powerfully intimate relationship with God, away from the influence of the church. How do you interpret the role of spirituality in the book? What did you learn from the girl's faith as it exists outside formal religion? How does her experience of the natural world inform her spirituality?
4. The protagonist faces many challenges to her physical well-being as she struggles to find food, shelter and safety in the wild. How does the novel convey the sensations of hunger, cold, fatigue and fear? In what ways does living on the edge of survival affect the protagonist's mental state, and what new insights, beliefs or philosophies emerge as a result?
5. The girl arrives in America because of colonialism, and yet we see how disempowered and oppressed she is by this system. How does the novel examine power and ownership --- of the earth and of people?
6. Lauren Groff's language is lush, powerful and rhythmic, particularly when describing unusual experiences that most of us don't encounter in everyday life --- a mystical confrontation with a bear, or weathering a terrible storm on a ship in which passengers die. How does this language contribute to our understanding of the girl's experiences?
7. At times during her journey, the protagonist is flooded with memories of the people she has loved, including the child Bess and the Dutch glassblower. What kinds of love does she feel for each, and how does this love sustain her? At what points during her ordeal do visions of Bess and the glassblower appear to her, and what do they represent?
8. Early in the story, the girl feels profound fear and grief, emotions that have "dwindled the self she had once known down to nothing. A nothing is no thing, a nothing is a thing with no past. It was also true that with no past, the girl thought, a nothing could be free" (page 5). What is the tension in *THE VASTER WILDS* between freedom and history? What about between freedom and identity?
9. Reckoning with the power and violence of men is a constant part of the girl's life, from the brutal minister to the men of the fort to the Jesuit priest. In what ways has her status as a woman conscripted her into particular kinds of service in England and in the colonial settlement? In what ways does the wilderness relieve those gendered burdens?
10. The protagonist faces relentless, unimaginable hardship throughout her life, and still, arguably, she never loses hope. Discuss the role of hope in the novel. Do you see the ending as hopeful?
11. The title *THE VASTER WILDS* could have multiple interpretations. What is its significance, and what layers of meaning did it take on over the course of your reading?
12. The wilds are less vast now than they were during the 17th century, when *THE VASTER WILDS* is set, but our relationship to the environment continues to be a defining one. Did the book change your own relationship with nature? To what degree do you read this as historical fiction, and to what degree is it engaging with issues we face in the contemporary world?

Author Bio

Lauren Groff is a three-time National Book Award finalist and the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels *THE MONSTERS OF TEMPLETON*, *ARCADIA*, *FATES AND FURIES*, *MATRIX* and *THE VASTER WILDS*, and the celebrated short story collections *DELICATE EDIBLE BIRDS* and *FLORIDA*. She has won the Story Prize and the Joyce Carol Oates Prize, and has been a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2024, she was named one of the *TIME* 100 most influential people. Groff's work regularly appears in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic* and elsewhere. Her work has been translated into 36 languages. She lives in Gainesville, Florida, where she and her husband run an independent bookstore, The Lynx.

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