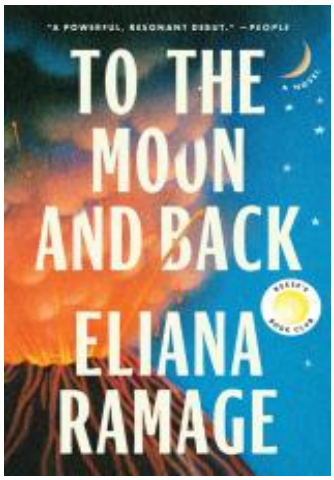
To the Moon and Back

by Eliana Ramage



About the Book

One young woman?s relentless quest to become the first Cherokee astronaut will irrevocably alter the fates of the people she loves most in this tour de force of a debut about ambition, belonging and family.

My mother took my sister and me, and she drove through the night to a place she felt a claim to, a place on earth she thought we might be safe. I stopped asking questions. I picked little glass pieces from my sister?s hair. I watched the moon.

Steph Harper is on the run. When she was five, her mother fled an abusive husband --- with Steph and her younger sister in tow --- to Cherokee Nation, where she hoped they might finally belong. In response, Steph sets her sights as far away from Oklahoma as she can get, vowing that she will let nothing get in the way of pursuing the rigorous physical and academic training she knows she will need to be accepted by NASA, and ultimately, to go to the moon.

Spanning three decades and several continents, TO THE MOON AND BACK encompasses Steph?s turbulent journey, along with the multifaceted and intertwined lives of the three women closest to her: her sister, Kayla, an artist who goes on to become an Indigenous social media influencer, and whose determination to appear good takes her life to unexpected places; Steph?s college girlfriend, Della, Owens, who strives to reclaim her identity as an adult after being removed from her Cherokee family through a challenge to the Indian Child Welfare Act; and Hannah, Steph and Kayla?s mother, who has held up her family?s tribal history as a beacon of inspiration to her children, all the while keeping her own past a secret.

In Steph?s certainty that only her ambition can save her, she will stretch her bonds with each of these women to the point of breaking, at once betraying their love and generosity, and forcing them to reconsider their own deepest desires in her shadow. Told through an intricately woven tapestry of narrative, TO THE MOON AND BACK is an astounding and expansive novel of mothers and daughters, love and sacrifice, alienation and heartbreak, terror and wonder. At its core, it

is the story of the extraordinary lengths to which one woman will go to find space for herself.

Discussion Guide

1. Brainstorm some adjectives to describe Steph, Kayla, Felicia and Hannah. What traits do they share? Which traits create the biggest rifts between them? Is there a character who resonates strongly with you?

2. In Part One, Hannah tells Steph and Kayla the story of their ancestors? experience of Removal. Later, Brett tells the Harper sisters about Cherokee Freedmen. How does this information reverberate throughout the novel?

3. During a fight over the historical inaccuracy of a peacock feather cape, Kayla accuses Hannah of not feeling ?authentically Indian enough? (page 47). What does that phrase mean to Kayla in that moment, and how does the meaning evolve for her over the course of the novel? What does being ?authentically Indian? mean to Steph, Hannah and Della?

4. Think back to Steph?s loves, including Meredith, Della, the physicist and Nadia. How would you describe each relationship? Does Steph demonstrate any romantic patterns? What about any signs of growth?

5. Men like Brett, Matthew and David (or the memory of him) play significant roles in TO THE MOON AND BACK. How are Steph, Kayla and Della affected by their varying approaches to fatherhood?

6. TO THE MOON AND BACK features multiple instances of blended families with nontraditional structures or origin stories, including single motherhood and adoption. Compare and contrast the parenting styles Ramage depicts, and the choices that characters like the Ericsons, Kayla and Della make for their children.

7. In the fall of freshman year, Della thinks about the ?shadow-life we carry alongside us, the choices we could have made? (page 144). By the end of the novel, what do you think Della might consider her shadow-life? What about Steph, Hannah and Kayla?

8. How does Ramage differentiate the various mediums she includes in the book --- like texting, Instagram posts, hab logs and dating profiles --- stylistically? How did you feel about this departure from standard prose?

9. How did learning the true circumstances of David?s death affect your reading of the book, specifically of Steph and Hannah as characters? Were you surprised by the twist?

10. What would happen to your experience of the book if Ramage had decided to write the story of Steph?s life from Steph?s perspective only? Are there other characters you would want to know via a first-person point of view?

11. What were your favorite lines or moments from the novel? Did any make you laugh? What about cry?

12. What lessons does Steph learn by the novel?s end, and what will you take away from the experience of reading TO THE MOON AND BACK?

Author Bio

Eliana Ramage holds an MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writers? Workshop. She has received residencies and fellowships from the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center, Lambda Literary, Tin House and Vermont Studio Center. A citizen of the Cherokee Nation, she lives in Nashville with her family. TO THE MOON AND BACK is her first novel.

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