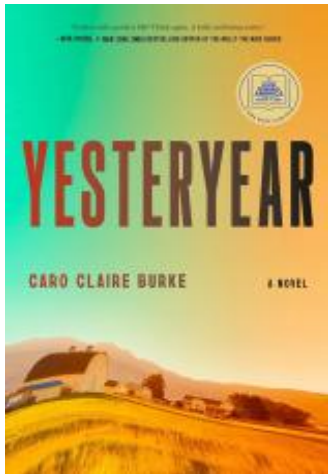


Yesteryear

by Caro Claire Burke



About the Book

A traditional American woman, a ?tradwife? influencer, suddenly awakens in the brutal reality of 1855. In this sensational debut novel, she must unravel whether this living nightmare is an elaborate hoax, a twisted reality show, or something far more sinister.

My name was Natalie Heller Mills, and I was perfect at being alive.

Natalie lives a traditional lifestyle. Her charming farmhouse is rustic, her husband a handsome cowboy, her six children each more delightful than the last. So what if there are nannies and producers behind the scenes, her kitchen hiding industrial-grade fridges and ovens, her husband the heir to a political dynasty? What Natalie?s followers --- all eight million of them --- don?t know won?t hurt them. And The Angry Women? The privileged, Ivy League, coastal elite haters who call her an antifeminist iconoclast? They?re sick with jealousy. Because Natalie isn?t simply living the good life, she?s living the ideal --- and just so happens to be building an empire from it.

Until one morning she wakes up in a life that isn?t hers. Her home, her husband, her children --- they?re all familiar, but something is off. Her kitchen is warmed by a sputtering fire rather than electricity, her children are dirty and strange, and her soft-handed husband is suddenly a competent farmer. Just yesterday, Natalie was curating photos of homemade jam for her Instagram, and now she?s expected to haul firewood and handwash clothes until her fingers bleed. Has she become the unwitting star of a ruthless reality show? Could it really be time travel? Is she being tested by God? By Satan? When Natalie suffers a brutal injury in the woods, she realizes two things: This is not her beautiful life, and she must escape by any means possible.

A gripping, electrifying novel that is as darkly funny as it is frightening, YESTERYEAR is a gimlet-eyed look at tradition, fame, faith and the grand performance of womanhood.

Discussion Guide

1. How did your opinion of Natalie change over the course of the book, especially as you learned more about her personal background, the origins of Yesteryear Ranch, and her transformation after Shannon's allegations?
2. Do you engage with accounts like Natalie's on social media? What's your relationship with them? Are you an "Angry Woman" or a fan/sympathizer? How has reading this novel changed the way you view the real-life influencers on which Natalie is based, especially #tradwives?
3. Discuss the description of the first year of posts on Yesteryear Ranch's profile (chapter 26). Did reading those stories change how you perceive posts on your own feed, including questioning what was actually happening in the moment that was captured, curated and edited to look a certain way? Consider what the man from Caleb's chat room finds appealing about Natalie's profile: "Look at how hard this woman works. Look how exhausted and beautiful she is. *This*, my friends, is the true American dream" (p. 240).
4. Throughout the book, Natalie compares herself with her college roommate, Reena, whose views on motherhood/womanhood seem to be polar opposites of Natalie's --- at first. Does Natalie sometimes long for, or admire, Reena's choices and views? How do you think Natalie's life would have progressed if she hadn't married so young like a "good Christian woman," dropped out of Harvard, and had to create her own security?
5. Similarly, when Natalie runs into her high school classmate at Target, she reflects: "Vanessa was liberated, sure --- but I was happy. And it was such a shame, wasn't it? The way some women so willingly compromised every ounce of themselves in the name of building a life for themselves that they didn't enjoy" (p. 23). At the end of the book, do you think Natalie sees how she's followed that path exactly, or is she still blind to her own delusion? Does meeting with Reena for the interview reinforce the truth, or the fantasy, of a perfect life?
6. Early in their relationship, Natalie identifies that Caleb lacks motivation and clarity in his life --- traits that deepen the rift in their marriage over time. What was ideal about their traditional gender roles being switched --- Natalie, the more dominant "breadwinner," and Caleb, more passive and sensitive --- for creating Yesteryear's success? How did it create problems when compared with the traditional roles they each played in the "Online" versions of themselves? Does this dynamic make Natalie's life more or less like Reena's?
7. How does Natalie and Caleb's marriage complicate the distinction between "man's work" and "women's work" in terms of what tasks and responsibilities are valued, paid, seen and innate? Reflect on your own relationships? "rules" or examples among friends and family.
8. How does Caleb's personality motivate Natalie to clarify and adjust her own personality? Discuss the strategies and tools she learns about self-presentation --- how to pretend without looking like you're pretending --- from her online classes and from Shannon (lessons she passes on to Clementine). Is being in the public eye a sacrifice and challenge for her, or a fulfillment of something she's always wanted?
9. What do you think would have happened if Caleb had had the chance to run for office? Would his public performance have hurt or helped Yesteryear, their family --- and America? Do you think their life would have been happier, easier,

more "successful" if he'd become a kindergarten teacher as he had wanted? Consider what happens at the "initiation" into manhood that Old Caleb leads Abel through on his 13th birthday. What lesson does the boy learn about his responsibilities and entitlements?

10. Discuss Natalie's relationship with her father-in-law, Doug. How do they manipulate and exploit each other for their own gains? The Mills family's power, image and influence strongly shape the outcome of Natalie's life, and yet the family itself is something she might not have found if not for marrying Caleb. What was the cost of that choice? Consider what Mary says when Natalie threatens to run away: "You know, there are people in the world who don't have a family at all. And how would you like that? Being all alone in the woods, no one to save you when you stumble into a trap?" (p. 152)

11. How does Doug's campaign reflect the current state of American politics, as well as historical trends? What do his campaigns and vision for America suggest about what people fantasize life, or "freedom," should and could be like --- and the kind of leader who promises to make that happen? How do those fantasies cross over into other spheres of culture, like social media --- and is that collaboration effective or harmful? Consider what Natalie tells Shannon at the rally: "It's a performance, Shannon. It's political theater. Not real" (p. 297); and Doug's rule that "a good politician doesn't change his policies, just the messaging" (p. 246). Does politics or social media seem more cutthroat in this representation?

12. In her morning gratitude recitation, Natalie says that she is thankful for "the Inheritance" (with a capital *I*). What do you think she's referring to here? Discuss the different inheritances she receives (and takes) --- examples of motherhood from her own mother, Amelia, and from Abigail; of womanhood from her relatives and Reena; of wealth and popularity; of the expectations to be "perfect at being alive" (p. 4), etc.

13. Natalie's mother constantly berates her with the same refrain: "Why is it so hard for you to be kind?" What did "kindness" give Natalie's mother, or any other woman in the book? Is kindness mutually exclusive of safety and agency? Consider how Natalie describes her role as an influencer vis-à-vis what people expect of women: "The goal of the influencer is not to be lovable, and it is not to be unbearable. The goal is to be both at once. In other words: addicting" (p. 247). What opposite of "kindness" would fill in this formula for "addicting"? Does Natalie figure that out?

14. In the past/future version of Yesteryear --- fashioned in the true homesteader style of the 1800s --- Natalie acknowledges that "for the first time in my life, I am being properly satisfied by a man" (p. 259). But "Old Caleb" is the same Caleb she married. So what, or who, do you think changed? Was Caleb empowered in some way to be more masculine, or Natalie disempowered? Did each of their definitions of marriage change in this attempt to radically alter time?

15. Compare Natalie's first set of children (Clementine, Samuel, Stetson, Jessa and Junebug) with her later children raised in the traditional ranch (Mary, Noah, Able and Maeve). Why do you think she doesn't recognize the latter as her own at first, even when their shabby "costumes" are the same aesthetic she desired and probably paid a lot of money for? What is she trying to protect her later children from that she couldn't with her first set of children by building this elaborate fantasy? How do Clementine and Mary play similar roles in mothering their mother, including offering her a compassion she was not able to give or receive as a mother herself? As she says of Mary: "...this daughter who is not my daughter, this teenager who is also my mother, my captor, my savior, in this cold unforgiving world" (p. 235).

16. Discuss Natalie's criminal charges: sexual assault, aggravated assault, improper working conditions, wire fraud, animal abuse and child abuse. Especially regarding the latter, what is the price the children pay for being forced into this masquerade, maybe even conceived for the sheer purposes of this image? How are these charges both a sentence and a liberation for the whole family? After her experience of postpartum depression with Clementine, do you think Natalie would have had more children if not for Doug's stipulations --- or any children at all?

17. Something that changes Natalie's experience of the 1800s farm is believing that her "audience" in this world is God (perhaps with some help from pharmaceuticals). Does her faith in this moment, and throughout the book, strike you as genuine? Where are Christian mores and tenets authentic in her life or part of the performance? If she had God in mind in her modern-day life, as a guide and "audience" member, do you think she would have done things differently?

18. Was Natalie ever *truly* happy? Do you think she knows what that would have looked or felt like? Are there moments of authentic happiness in the book --- that may or may not have made it to her feed?

19. What do you think happened to Natalie after the Shannon incident? What pushed her to such an extreme solution --- or was she moving away from sanity all along?

20. In the acknowledgments of the book, the author shares, "If I ever have a daughter: sweet girl, I wrote the ending with you in mind" (p. 394). Based on how the book closes, what do you think she wants for her daughter, and herself? Which character's future does she want for a little girl growing up in our times, and for a woman coming into motherhood?

Author Bio

Caro Claire Burke received her Master's in Fine Arts from the Bennington Writing Seminars. She is the co-host of "Diabolical Lies," a politics and culture podcast. *YESTERYEAR* is her first novel.

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