

Crooked River

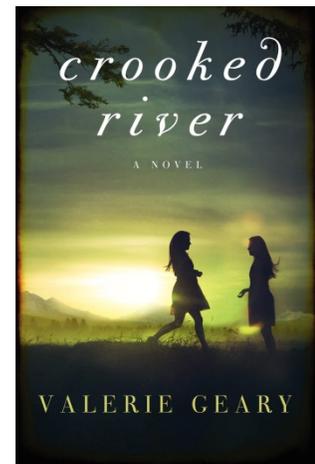
William Morrow

By Valerie Geary

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Introduction

With the inventiveness and emotional power of *Promise Not to Tell*, *Death of Bees*, and *After Her*, *Crooked River* is a powerful literary debut about family and friendship, good and evil, grief and forgiveness. .



He is not evil. I am not good.

We are the same: broken and put back together again.

Still grieving the sudden death of their mother, Sam and Ollie McAlister move to rural Oregon to live with Bear, their teepee-dwelling, beekeeper father. But shortly after they arrive a young woman is found dead floating in the river and the police arrest their eccentric father as the prime suspect.

Fifteen-year-old Sam knows that her father is not a murderer, even though all of the evidence points to the contrary. Unwilling to accept Bear could have hurt anyone, Sam embarks on a desperate hunt to save what's left of her shattered family.

I see things no one else does.

I see them there and wish I didn't. I want to tell and can't.

But Sam is not the only one who knows Bear is not a killer. Ollie, consumed with grief over her mother's death, has begun to see something she can only describe as shimmerings. The one who followed her home from her mom's funeral a month ago still refuses to leave. There's another one following Sam now, too, and both spirits are saying the same thing: the real killer is out there, closer than either girl can imagine.

Told from Sam and Ollie's alternating viewpoints *CROOKED RIVER* is a family story, a ghost story, and a mystery readers will be thinking about long after the last page.

Questions for Discussion

1. From the beginning of the novel, we are presented with two different narrators: Sam and Ollie. What were your first impressions of these sisters based on the initial chapters of

the book? How would you describe their personalities? What impact do you think the use of dual, first-person narration had on the story?

2. Talk about the character of Frank “Bear” McAlister. How does your impression of him change from the beginning to the end of the book, if it does at all?
3. Sam makes numerous references to Bear’s bee farm and bee-keeping practices in CROOKED RIVER. Why do you think bees feature so prominently in the novel? What is significant about their behaviors? Can you draw any parallels between the actions of the characters in the book and how bee colonies operate?
4. Consider the examples of parent-child relationships in the novel. How do you think Sam and Ollie’s relationship with their mother and Bear is similar to their relationship with Franny and Zeb? How is it different? What do you think the author could be suggesting about what makes a good parent? Furthermore, do you think Bear can be considered a good parent? Explain why or why not.
5. Think about Travis’ relationship with his parents. Compare and contrast it to Sam and Ollie’s relationship with the adults in their lives. How would you describe the Roths’ love for their children? Do you feel empathy for the Roth family? Or to any member of the Roth family in particular? Why or why not?
6. What do you think is significant about Ollie’s attachment to Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland? Why do you think she allows this specific book to speak for her?
7. Ollie refuses to use her voice after her mother dies, Taylor Bellweather is denied the opportunity to speak once she is murdered, and at the end of the novel Sam and Ollie’s mother stresses the importance of telling people you love them—the role of “voice” is very important. Why do you think the novel places an emphasis on a person’s capability to use his or her voice?
8. Describe your feelings toward Deputy Santos throughout the investigation of Taylor Bellweather’s death. Could you understand her reasoning behind wanting Sam to accept that Bear was guilty? Why or why not?
9. What effect does the landscape and setting of rural Oregon have on the overall mood of the story?
10. Although the novel centers around a mystery, how does it exhibit the elements of a ghost story and a coming-of-age story as well? Are there elements of other literary genres present in the novel? If so, what are they?

11. Think about the theme of forgiveness in CROOKED RIVER. What does forgiveness mean to Sam? To Ollie? To other characters?

12. Sam states at the end of the novel, “For us to keep on living, loving, being who we are, we have to forget how badly the worst parts hurt us. We have to heal.” Do you agree with her? Moreover, what does this statement suggest about the journey of grief?