

HEART SPRING MOUNTAIN

A Novel

ROBIN MACARTHUR

Reading Group Guide

1. Both Bonnie and Vale simultaneously love and hate Heart Spring Mountain, the place they consider “home.” Can you relate to this desire to both return to and be liberated from the landscapes of your childhood? Why is Vale reluctant to return there, and why does she stay? By the end of the novel, do you think she is hindered by having returned, or freed by doing so?

2. MacArthur weaves the theme of time throughout *Heart Spring Mountain*, specifically the notion that the past is embedded in the present. How is that theme mirrored in the structure of the novel? How is it reflected in the lives of its characters? Do your own notions of time align with MacArthur’s and the ideas selected from the book *No Word for Time*?

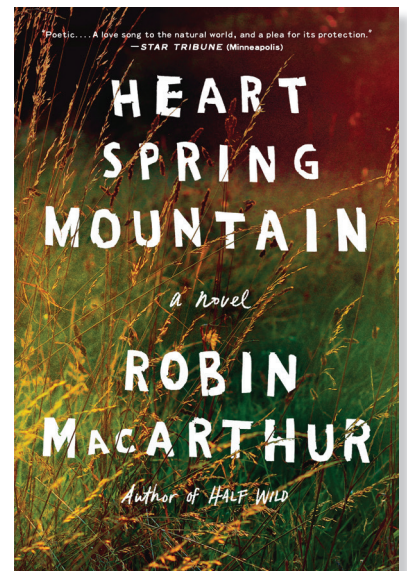
3. At 93 years, Hazel has lived through extraordinary transformations in rural New England culture and values—the introduction of electricity and running water, the end of small-scale farming, multiple wars, a large wave of hippies and homesteaders into her state, diversification, and now, climate change. How is Hazel’s compass—an unfaltering Puritan dedication to hard work and family land—outdated, and how does it shift toward the end of the novel? What are her regrets, and what does she learn about love in her last days?

4. Toward the end of the book Deb tells Vale, “The hippies were right,” and Vale agrees. Do you agree with them? What did the back-to-the-land movement get right, as shown through the lives of Deb and Stephen and Ginny, and where were its blind spots? What can we learn today from those values of self-sufficiency and land stewardship, and where can we do better?

5. The shadows of wars flicker throughout the novel: the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War. Distant as they are, how have these wars affected this family and this rural community? How have they affected your own communities?

6. Lena is the “free spirit” of the book, a loner deeply connected to nature and animals, and averse to the rules and constrictions of society. How does Vale’s discovery of Lena’s cabin, and Lena’s notebooks, and Lena’s secrets, affect the story Vale tells about her own life and her mother’s life? How do you think it will change Vale’s life going forward?

7. Vale discovers, partway through the novel, both that her great-grandmother was Native American, and that the Vermont she has thought she has known her whole life has a disturbing history of eugenics and racial violence. How is Vale’s sense of self and place changed with these revelations? In your own communities, what mythologies of place and family are well known, and what stories have been silenced?



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8. Art plays a large role in *Heart Spring Mountain*. How do visual art, music, film, dance and literature feed and heal and bring joy to the characters in the book? Do you agree with Deb and Ginny that art has the potential to reshape lives and reshape the world?

9. Halfway through the book, Vale and Deb discuss the science of epigenetics, and how we carry, in our DNA, the wounds of our mothers and fathers and ancestors. How do you see this reflected in the characters? What does the novel make you think about the possibilities of generational healing, transformation, and resurrection?

10. One of the major topics of the book is climate change, and how our warming earth is affecting communities daily around the globe. How do the characters in *Heart Spring Mountain* make sense of that widespread devastation and find hope, solace and connection in light of these frightening changes? How do you?

11. One of the refrains of the novel is a line from Lena's notebook: "Near the sickness also lies the cure." How do you think that applies to the various cultural and personal wounds of the book: war, addiction, climate change, poverty, loneliness? Vale and Deb imply that the "cure" is to shift away from a worldview of isolation to a worldview of interconnection—with the natural world, with family, and with our chosen communities. Do you agree?

12. At the end of the book Vale finds Bonnie's shoe and believes her mother is dead. A day later, Hazel sees Bonnie climb through her living room window. In a flashback scene, we see Bonnie crossing the crumbling bridge to the other side. What do you think happened to Bonnie? How do you imagine Bonnie living on, in either embodied or spirit form?

Suggested Readings

Evan T. Pritchard, *No Word for Time*

Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark*

Grace Paley, *Begin Again: Collected Poems*

Helen and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life*

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

