

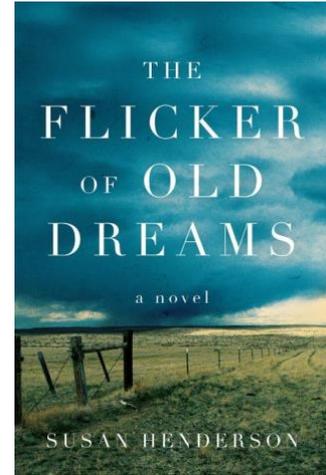
The Flicker of Old Dreams

Harper Perennial

By Susan Henderson
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Introduction

With the quiet precision of Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and the technical clarity of Mary Roach's *Stiff*, this is a novel about a young woman who comes most alive while working in her father's mortuary in a small, forgotten Western town.



"The dead come to me vulnerable, sharing their stories and secrets . . . "

Mary Crampton has spent all of her thirty years in Petroleum, a small Western town once supported by a powerful grain company. Living at home, she works as the embalmer in her father's mortuary: an unlikely job that has long marked her as an outsider. Yet, to Mary there is a satisfying art to positioning and styling each body to capture the essence of a subject's life.

Though some townsfolk pretend that the community is thriving, the truth is that Petroleum is crumbling away—a process that began twenty years ago when an accident in the grain elevator killed a beloved high school athlete. The mill closed for good, the train no longer stopped in town, and Robert Golden, the victim's younger brother, was widely blamed for the tragedy and shipped off to live elsewhere. Now, out of the blue, Robert has returned to care for his terminally ill mother. After Mary—reserved, introspective, and deeply lonely—strikes up an unlikely friendship with him, shocking the locals, she finally begins to consider what might happen if she dared to leave Petroleum.

Set in America's heartland, *The Flicker of Old Dreams* explores themes of resilience, redemption, and loyalty in prose as lyrical as it is powerful.

Questions for Discussion

1. What three words would you use to best describe this book?
2. Have you ever been to a town as small as Petroleum? What do you think it would be like to live there?
3. What did you think of the children playing the game Dead Eddie?
4. What do you think it does to somebody to be unemployed or underemployed for years?

5. In what ways do you think the people of this town feel separate from the America they see on their television screens?
6. Why do you think Mary is more comfortable with the dead than the living?
7. Did any of the embalming details surprise you or make you feel squeamish?
8. What are your own family rituals for burying and mourning the dead?
9. What was your favorite moment in the book?
10. What do you think of the relationship between Mary and her father? Robert and his mother?
11. Did anything about Doris's viewing move you?
12. How did you feel about the ending?
13. What do you think will happen to the remaining residents of Petroleum?