

VIKING READERS GUIDE

STEAL THE NORTH

AN INTRODUCTION TO *STEAL THE NORTH*

Growing up with a struggling single mother and no friends to call her own, Emmy Nolan is a lonely and socially awkward teen who dreams of a typical family life. For years, her mother, Kate, has told Emmy that her father is dead, that she has no aunts or uncles, nothing beyond their tiny apartment in California—but an unexpected phone call changes all that, and suddenly an entire family history unspools before her. Kate’s fundamentalist Christian sister, Beth, heartbroken after numerous miscarriages, needs Emmy to participate in a faith healing for her last-ditch effort to have a baby. A complicated blend of guilt, obligation, and love compels Kate to send her daughter to rural Washington and into the world of repressive religion and trailer park poverty that Kate worked so hard to leave behind.

Steal the North is the stunning debut novel from writer Heather Brittain Bergstrom that traces the transformative events of that brief summer—Emmy’s first love and terrible loss, discovering disturbing truths about her mother’s past, and finding home in a place she doesn’t remember. Bergstrom layers her novel with multiple perspectives, and each character is authentic and compelling, each voice sincere. Offering a nuanced and sympathetic view into a contemporary, fractured family, the novel is equal parts poignant and witty, heart wrenching and inspiring.

Emmy is the beating heart of the novel, a young woman full of curiosity and sharp intelligence who is vulnerable and unsure of her place in the world. The immediate love she feels from and for her aunt Beth and uncle Matt nearly overwhelms her, and the rugged beauty of Washington State speaks to her soul; Emmy finds the home she was always missing. The rivers and scablands enchant her, and these feelings are only heightened when she falls in love with Reuben Tonasket, the Native American boy next door. Reuben explains the landscape to her through his own culture—its beauty, its mythology, its painful past of marginalization and oppression. Emmy and Reuben’s once-in-a-lifetime love is fueled by the optimism of youth, but catches them between reason and passion.

There are many dimensions to the novel: Beth’s desperate desire for a baby and the tragic influence of her fundamentalist church; Kate’s release from her dark personal history; Matt’s journey from joy to grief, and back again; and the stories of secondary characters, like Reuben’s sister, Teresa, who finds love of her own. In *Steal the North*, Bergstrom has crafted a narrative of quiet beauty that explores the many shapes that love can take, and the many sacrifices that love requires.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Heather Brittain Bergstrom has won numerous awards for her short fiction, including the Kore Press Short Fiction Chapbook Award and awards from the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *Chicago Tribune*. She currently lives in California with her husband and children. This is her first novel.

A CONVERSATION WITH HEATHER BRITAIN BERGSTROM

1. How did your own life inform the events in the novel?

I grew up in two different Baptist churches, the second one being far more fundamentalist: skirts only for females, no television, secular books, or music. I was educated through the tenth grade in an unaccredited basement academy by deacons' wives, some of whom, like my mom, hadn't even finished high school themselves. As a teenager, I broke my ankle while rafting down the Snake River in a long dress. A segment of our church didn't believe in going to the doctor for any reason. My parents weren't part of that segment, so my broken ankle was treated. It was a repressive environment, for females in particular, who were taught to be silent and submissive. Luckily, my dad wasn't a jerk. In fact, it was my mom who was the zealot. In the first church, the sense of community was a positive thing. I still love some of those church members dearly, and my characters Beth and Matt are partly a reflection of that love. As far as my lack of education, I suffered in the real world. My senior year of high school I took my first science class and it may as well have been taught in a foreign language. It took me years and years to get through junior college and transfer to a university: I had a lot of catching up to do. Education is very important to my protagonist's mom, Kate. In fact, for her, it replaces religion. Graduating from high school and going to college are also important goals for Reuben, my young Native American narrator, who sees education as the best way to help his tribe.

2. You create compelling backstories for all your characters and persuasively argue for the decisions they make, right or wrong. Which character was most difficult for you to write, and why?

Kate wore me out: She was hands down the most difficult character for me to write. I kept having to redo her first chapter. Certainly there are pieces of myself in Emmy, but Kate is probably the most similar to me. Despite that, or maybe because of that, Kate was hard to crack. I don't normally struggle with cracking my characters. Most open up for me on the page. She was like this rock that I had to take a pickax to. At times it felt I was using a pickax on myself. Like Kate, I waitressed at a truck stop as a teenager. I was propositioned often by truck drivers, but I never accepted. Years later I wondered *what if*. What if I'd been in a position where I could not have turned down their offers. It haunts me. Like Kate, I was an unwed pregnant teenager. Unlike Kate, I eventually married the father of my baby. But *what if* I'd had to raise the baby on my own? I am in awe of single moms. Like Kate I struggled upriver to get an education. Like Kate I found refuge in California. There is a danger in writing characters too similar to yourself. I have done so before in my short stories. The lens of fiction, so necessary for perspective, imagination, and, yes, preservation, begins to slip. The dream is interrupted. The stage partly dismantled. The actor removing her costume suddenly has your face, your backstory. But in a novel, the show must go on for another two hundred pages. Such self-dissection and public display are probably better left to poets. Even short story writers. I hope to never do so in a novel again! I want to create a world and lose myself in it. But maybe, for the writer, losing and finding yourself in fiction are two sides of the same coin: "the madness of art," to quote Henry James.

The Kate of early drafts annoyed my main reader and my editor. I agree Kate is kind of a bitch, but I thought her bravery and determination and her longing for knowledge helped deflect the glare of her aggressiveness. Not enough. Another rewrite. I had to show Kate at her most vulnerable, hence the last part of her first chapter: I had been trying to avoid writing directly about her sex work, knowing it would be tough for me and the reader. Tough, but necessary. Kate doesn't narrate in the second half of the book, other than a brief love letter to her sister. Instead, she is shown through the eyes and thoughts of the two men who love her: Jamie and Spencer. I hoped these two male narrators could persuade readers to like Kate. Or not

like, but sympathize with her. In Emmy's final chapter, Kate becomes almost intolerable, even for me—which actually helps the ending of the novel be more of a triumph when the two kids break free of her grip.

3. Beth and Reuben's love is touching and inspiring, but what—if any—do you see as the dangers of experiencing such an intense love at such a young age? Has parenthood altered the way you see this kind of romance?

Great love can happen at any age. I truly believe this. Even sixteen. My parents married in their teens. My two sisters and I married quite young, and we are all three still married. But I wouldn't advocate this for my own children. In fact, I'd advise against it. Grow up first, go to college, see the world. Know thyself—that sort of thing. Love is beautiful, yes, but it is also messy as hell. I believe it to be the most potent force in the universe. It's hard enough to handle this force as an adult, let alone as an adolescent. Teenagers already live in a sort of hyperreality, making it difficult for them to see past next week when each moment in the present is so magnified. As much as love can uplift and sustain, it can also tear down and destroy. Kids, however, are more resilient than adults. It's perspective they lack. Maybe it's easier to get your heart broken at a younger age. Regardless, every person should have their heart broken at least once. It's part of being human. You've lived too carefully if you haven't, or else you've had incredible luck.

I have a sixteen-year-old son. If he spent the summer with relatives out of state and then asked to stay to finish high school there because he'd fallen in love with the neighbor girl, the answer would be no. I believe in love, but, perhaps given my personal background, I believe in education even more. Do I sound like Kate?

Reuben and Emmy are forced to live apart for a significant amount of time. The book might have a happy ending, but my young protagonists have to earn it. I believe true, unselfish, undiluted love can endure separation, heartache, and loneliness. Emmy and Reuben are battered by the end, but they find their way back to each other. Their love is larger than the events and circumstances that separated them. Maybe youthful resilience was on their side, or just love's ability to endure at any age.

4. There are so many types of love in the novel: love of family, romantic love, and spiritual passion, among others. Which do you feel is the deepest? The most lasting?

Let me use Matt and Bethany to answer this question. When I first envisioned this novel, Beth was not going to die. Instead, she was going to lose her faith along with her ability to have children. I soon discovered Beth would never lose her faith and passion for Christ, any more than Reuben could walk completely away from the traditions and rituals of his tribe and faith. What happens to Beth, however, in her last lucid moments before slipping into a coma, is that she realizes Matt, not Christ, has been her rock and her real salvation. She regrets the precious time she wasted longing so fervently for a child. Perhaps she also regrets devoting so much time to Christ, or at least to the church. Not only was Matt her salvation, he was also her family. For Matt, Beth was everything. He would've given up the world for her. "Toss it yonder, like a rind," to quote Emily Dickinson.

In contrast, Jamie Kagen gave up romantic love so as not to lose his family. It left him full of regret. There is a greater risk in giving up family for the person you love than vice versa. Choosing romantic love almost always seems heroic; walking away from that love borders on cowardice. Yes, family will always be family. The blood bond is for life, so it's generally the most lasting. A lover, a wife, a partner—the bond isn't always for life. But the intimacy makes it the deepest we can experience.

The love between siblings is the second strongest love in the novel. Reuben and Teresa. Kate and Beth.

5. *The story of Narcissa Whitman and her missionary work in Washington State highlights the different perspectives Native Americans and whites have on their shared history. Considering the number of similar stories in American history, why did you choose this particular figure? How does it reflect on Emmy's situation?*

I first visited the Whitman Mission as a young girl. Not on a school field trip, but with a friend's family. I was completely captivated with the story of the Whitmans and the Cayuse Indians on whose land the mission was built. I had no clue of the real significance of the place until I was much older, but it felt I had left a piece of myself there. I returned for that piece thirty years later. By then I understood the historical and cultural importance of the place. When Narcissa Whitman crossed the Rocky Mountains, riding side saddle, she brought with her all the white American notions of *home*. She was one of the first two pioneer women to cross the Rockies. She helped establish the first pioneer home in the far West, and she gave birth to the first pioneer child west of the Rockies. She quickly lost her only child, but she went on to adopt eleven others: orphans from the Oregon Trail and illegitimate ("half-breed") children of fur trappers. Because my ancestors came West via the Oregon Trail, I consider Narcissa my grandmother. That being said, she was a terrible missionary. Her journals are filled with bigoted comments about the Indians. She and her husband were never physically abusive to the Indians, but neither were they accepting.

I admire the Whitmans because they epitomize the pioneer spirit. As a woman, Narcissa struggled with depression and extreme loneliness. She missed her sister, Jane, the most. The landscape haunted Narcissa, seeming to echo her loneliness. She was cut off from everything she once knew by the mountains she'd crossed. It was a painful severing and the peaks were a stark reminder. But every day she did her work. Hard, hard, hard work surviving in the wilderness. She grew proud of her ability to cross the Snake River. She came to love the hills around the mission and would take long walks into them. She took her orphan children on picnics. I don't want to impose my twenty-first century ideas on her by judging her too harshly—it would be like she did in judging the Indian women she observed by her own standards.

The deaths of the Whitmans at the hands of the Cayuse set off the Pacific Northwest Indian Wars. The Whitman Mission is a haunting place: a stage upon which the great encounter between whites and Indians was played out with all its drama, tragedy, and sorrow. As soon as I finished writing the first scene between Emmy and Reuben, I knew they had to visit the Whitman Mission together.

The story of Narcissa is more reflective of Kate and Beth than Emmy—given their religious background and the separation of sisters. But Emmy also feels connected, and not *just* because her aunt, who had told her about the Whitmans, had recently died, but because Emmy feels the pioneer spirit in the place. She kneels and touches the wagon grooves to absorb this spirit. Eastern Washington is Emmy's new home, just as it was for the pioneers crossing the continent.

The mission is also a place of violence. History becomes real for Emmy there. She'd been to Reuben's reservation and seen the present. Suddenly, the past and present merge for her in a way they always have for Native Americans, and as I hope they do for readers of this scene.

6. *What are the risks in writing about the Native American experience as a non-Native American?*

The risks are enormous. Do I overromanticize the Native American people? Do I show conditions as too bleak? Not bleak enough? How could I possibly begin to understand what it is like to be a Native American youth? How can I possibly understand their spirituality? Their culture? Their sorrow, joy, loss, love? While Reuben and his sister were always going to be characters in this novel, I originally had no intention of narrating in their voices. Wouldn't that be stepping over the line? Assuming too much, even for an artist? Representation is one thing, but narrating in their voices is another. The truth is Reuben came to me. He

jumped off the back steps of his sister's trailer and asked me to let him tell his own story. His chapters wrote themselves. They were the easiest in the book. Nearing the end of the novel, I thought it only fair to let Teresa speak directly. Reuben, by this point, is as big a character as Emmy. The five adults in Emmy's life have narrated. Teresa certainly deserved a chapter.

I do not plan to narrate in the voice of Native Americans in my next novel, but they will always have a presence in my novels as long as I continue to set my books in the Pacific Northwest.

I grew up between the two largest Indian reservations in Washington State: the Colville and the Yakama reservations. Grand Coulee Dam divides my home county from the Colville Reservation. I was born in Moses Lake, Washington, a town named after Chief Moses, whose descendants live on the Colville Reservation. Native Americans are very much part of the area where I grew up. There's extreme prejudice against them for being "drunks" and "lazy," for being allowed to fish in places where whites can't (part of their treaty rights), and lately for being allowed to help manage some of Washington State's natural resources. I wasn't taught as a kid to respect or even recognize the existence of these marginalized people—in fact, I was taught the opposite.

Our Christian school took frequent field trips to the enormous dams on the Columbia River. Dams scared the hell out of me, so I'd sneak into the tiny Native American cultural centers adjacent to the visitor centers. The museums fascinated me. I didn't realize as a young girl that the museums were afterthoughts by the Bureau of Reclamation: a nifty place to display the tattered remains of indigenous cultures whose centuries-old and sacred fishing sites were now drowned forever in backwater.

Most places in eastern Washington (rivers, towns, dams, schools, lakes) are named after Indians, as if to honor them, but in reality many Native Americans live in extreme poverty. You can drive on highways and roads in eastern Washington, where to the left is reservation land and to the right is nonreservation land. The difference is incredibly sad and unfair. Native Americans in Washington State have survived despite everything whites have done to their land and heritage. Just as I think contemporary southern literature is still haunted by the legacy of slavery and racism against blacks, so is western literature haunted by the near annihilation and continued marginalization of the Indian. In a way, through the act of writing *Steal the North*, I stepped back into those tiny museums.

The last three summers I have returned to eastern Washington to do research on the Colville Reservation and along the upper Columbia. For years I have done extensive reading and research on Pacific Northwest and Plateau Indians. But most important, I lived by the Colville Reservation for eighteen years. I went camping and fishing as a child on the rivers and lakes that border the reservation. People and place-names, such as Okanogan, Tonasket, Methow, Chewuch, Wenatchee, Wanapum, Cle Elum, Klickitat, and Suquamish, were easy for me to pronounce.

Perhaps it's because I grew up so isolated (geographically and in the church) that I feel compelled to represent Native Americans who are even more isolated in the same part of the country. Their isolation keeps them united as a people, as a nation, but it leaves them without jobs and resources. The landscape of eastern Washington—the coulees, sage, wind, rivers, lakes—is shared by whites and Indians. It has shaped both cultures. The main difference is that Indians have lived on the land for thousands and thousands of years. The land holds the bones of their ancestors. They see themselves as the appointed caretakers. The legends that explain the land originated in their languages. Their spirits continue to linger, as Chief Seattle warned whites, everywhere. I sensed these spirits as a child. You just had to listen. I've always been a listener. And I've always been an observer. Too often people think of Indians as relics from the past. In my novel, they are not relics, they are people living their lives as kids in high school, struggling with algebra, and playing football; health care workers; dancers at powwows; riders at rodeos; teenagers cruising in trucks

and eating gas station nachos; old people waiting at medical clinics; all ages drumming at churches; elders wearing Nikes and praying beside creeks for the salmon to return.

7. Reuben has enormous pride in his culture and draws strength from its rituals. Despite Emmy's vulnerability and lack of family tradition, she, too, has a strong will. What is the source of her strength?

The source of Emmy's strength is her ability to love deeply. Because she's had so few people in her life, she loves them fiercely. She also inherited a great deal of stubbornness from both her parents. There is a core to Emmy that I believe was actually strengthened during her silent and lonely childhood. She does not need instant gratification. She can be patient and endure. Obviously, there are downsides: She is socially inept and can't seem to make friends in college (although her grief is probably the main barrier). Emmy draws strength from the novels of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters in the same way Reuben draws strength from the myths of his culture. Emmy's longings for family and spirituality propel her. She might have spent her childhood alone, but she didn't pull down the shades. She knew even before she had a real reason that one day she'd stand up to her mom. For many girls this is the first step in life's journey. At the novel's end, Emmy takes full possession of her life. She isn't just throwing herself into Reuben's arms. Rather, in him she secures a partner for the trek ahead.

8. What was your writing process for the novel? How long did it take to complete? Did the novel change dramatically between your first draft and the book that readers now have in their hands?

The first draft took me one year to complete. But I mean twelve months of doing nothing else. I shut the world out completely, except for my teenage son. I worked long hours every day. I worked at night. It felt as if I couldn't breathe until the first draft was done. I met with a fellow writer and dear friend once a week for council: Are the chapters working, what next, that sort of thing. She was invaluable. Then I revised the manuscript for six months on my own. I worked on it for a month with my agent and then a year or so with my editor. I don't think the draft has changed dramatically. My agent cut out my prologue and a chapter in the voice of the minister. But no characters were cut entirely, or new ones added. No plot changes, not even minor ones. However, the novel is much, much improved: structurally more sound, with far more texture, less fluff, rough edges smoothed, loose threads snipped or woven through, characters' motivations clarified. It was hard and often tedious work. But it wasn't an overhaul. In my acknowledgments I thank my editor for her ability to "add grace and cut bullshit." She did this throughout, page by page, chapter by chapter.

9. In the acknowledgments, you thank a firefighter who saved your computer—could you share a little more of that story?

In early September of 2005, the teenage neighbor boy flicked a cigarette and caught his father's house on fire. It also caught our house on fire. One flick and we lost almost everything, if not to flame, then to smoke and water damage. After announcing the fire, my second-grade son ran out of the house and far down the street without a glance backward toward his sister or me. We still tease him about this. My daughter and I tried to grab things, but how fast the house began to feel like a furnace! I tried desperately to unplug my computer in the chaos. Oh, why hadn't I backed up my files onto disks, easily grabbed in an emergency? I had a decade of writing on my computer, even a failed first attempt at *Steal the North*. I paced barefoot across the street while the fire crews did their job. I didn't want to make a scene, whining about my stories and characters. My real kids were safe, after all. The neighbor kids were safe. After the large flames were out, but not the smolders and smoke, a fireman came to me and offered to rescue my computer if it wasn't

already destroyed. He'd overheard that I was a writer. Maybe he was a writer himself or had one in his family. Earlier in the evening another fireman had proudly brought me, so randomly, two platters he'd rescued from my dining room wall. I didn't have the heart to tell him the platters were twelve-dollar platters from Target, not family heirlooms, although they have become so now.

On a side note, we lost our home a week after Hurricane Katrina. My husband did not lose his job. My children did not lose their schools. It helped put things into perspective. How many struggling writers lost years of work to Katrina?

10. This is your first novel, however you're already a successful short story writer. Why did you decide to write a novel? Will your next project be a novel or a short story?

Actually, I was a poet for many years before I started writing short stories. Narrative poetry mostly. I was accepted into my MFA program in poetry, not prose. Poetry lent itself to my being a young mother and a student. I tried my hand at a novel (an early version of *Steal the North*) when first making the transition from poetry to prose, but I didn't possess the skills or have the time. I wrote short fiction in my thirties. I was never formally trained, just read, read, read. I began *Steal the North* (mostly from scratch) the year I turned forty. My oldest child had been in college long enough that I could turn her bedroom into an office. Finally, I had a "room of one's own." I think I was meant to be a novelist because my short stories were always lengthy and often linked.

Writing a novel was a fantastic experience. I loved staying with my characters for long durations. We became quite intimate, although they continued to surprise me right up until the last page. Writing a novel is total immersion in another world. There were no breathers for me between chapters as there had been between my poems and stories. It's exhausting and exhilarating work. And on such a large scale: 350 pages versus 25. It's like comparing a lake to a pond. A writer can drown in either, but the chances of not reaching the shore are greater when crossing a lake. I'd be a fool to say writers delve deeper into characters in novels than they do in short stories because look at Alice Munro and Chekhov. But the risks are more epic and perhaps too the strain on the body, mind, and imagination of the writer. Certainly a larger ecosystem is on display in a novel: beneath and above the surface and on the shores (multiple narrators and perspectives and the space to move back and forth in time).

My next project is a novel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is there a place in the world that has shaped you as Washington does Emmy? Or, like Kate's own experience in Washington, is there a place that you felt you had to leave behind?
2. How are religion and spirituality depicted in the novel? Do you see a difference between the two?
3. The novel switches perspective with each chapter. How did this affect your understanding of the plot and your relationship with the characters?
4. Which character did you identify with the most? Why? Which character did you find most frustrating? Most affecting?

5. What is the significance of the heat Emmy feels in her hands after the faith healing? Have you ever experienced something miraculous that couldn't be easily explained?
6. How did Beth's work with her herb garden fulfill her? How did it damage her?
7. Did you have an intense romance in your youth similar to the one between Emmy and Reuben? What happened?
8. Who is Coyote? What is the connection between the Coyote story and Reuben's father? Why does Reuben feel such pride in his father, despite his many flaws?
9. Was Kate right to separate Reuben and Emmy? How do you think their lives would have been different if they had finished high school together?
10. Teresa believes that Matt is slowly being released from his grief over Beth's death and at the same time released from their restrictive, fundamentalist life. She says, "He must sense this release. How terribly painful" (p. 289). Why would this release be painful for him?
11. What parallels do you see between Emmy and Kate's experiences with young love? Are there any parallels between Emmy's and Beth's experiences?
12. If you could cast a film adaptation of *Steal the North*, whom would you choose?