The Persian Pickle Club

Table of Contents

Reading Group Gold 3
Editorial Reviews 5
Contemporary Authors 6
Persian Pickle Club
By Sandra Dallas

About the Book

It is the 1930s, and hard times have hit Harveyville, Kansas, where the crops are burning up, and there's not a job to be found. For Queenie Bean, a young farm wife, a highlight of each week is the gathering of the Persian Pickle Club, a group of local ladies dedicated to improving their minds, exchanging gossip, and putting their quilting skills to good use. When a new member of the club stirs up a dark secret, the women must band together to support and protect one another. In her magical, memorable novel, Sandra Dallas explores the ties that unite women through good times and bad.

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. The Denver Post called this "A book about how times can never be so hard that they can't be eased when people come together." How do the gatherings of the Persian Pickle Club ease its member's troubles?
2. Queenie says, "It was marrying that made women appreciate other women." Grover is a nice man who listens to Queenie's fears and shares his own. What do women characters provide each other?
3. Does Rita think she is a good friend to Queenie? Is she aware of the trouble her insensitive questions cause?
4. Tom bends down and tests the dryness of the dirt, realizing that there's no way of growing crops in it, but then turns up the road, apparently happy. How is this ability to ignore disaster echoed elsewhere in the book?
5. Quilting is central to this story. How is Harveyville like a quilt? What are the patterns? What is the stitching that holds it together?
6. Tyrone, the Reverend, and his sister are the only characters in the book who loudly profess devotion to God, yet they are the most disliked members of the community. How else does this book turn morality and religion on its head?
7. Rita is a different kind of woman from the other members of the club—she doesn't seem to want to empathize with anyone. Discuss how her goals and feelings differ from those of the members.
8. At the end, Rita sends a "Friendship Forever" quilt to Queenie and the club. What is Rita trying to tell the club?
9. Rita includes a card that says, "If you wonder who's responsible, I did it." Who really did do it? Does it matter?
Praise


"An endearing story that depicts small-town eccentricities with affection and adds dazzle with some late-breaking surprises. Dallas hits all the right notes, combining an authentic look at the social fabric of Depression-era life with a homespun suspense story." --Publishers Weekly

"Affecting...A book about how times can never be so hard that they can't be eased when people come together." --Denver Post

Author Biography

Sandra Dallas is the author of Alice’s Tulips, The Diary of Mattie Spenser, and Buster Midnight’s Café. She lives in Denver, Colorado.

Authors Note from www.sandradallas.com

In 1933, shortly after they were married in Illinois, my parents both lost their jobs. So they moved to Harveyville, Kansas to live on my paternal grandparents’ farm and earn their keep by doing farm work. One morning, a neighbor stopped by and offered to pay a dollar for a day’s work in the fields. Dad and his brother flipped a coin to see which one of them would get the job. Dad won, and he worked so hard that he finished up by noon and was paid just four bits. That was the only money he earned all summer. My parents are not Tom and Rita in The Persian Pickle Club, but their desire to move off the farm gave me the idea for the book. By the way, the Ritter farm is my grandparents’ farm in Harveyville, and Mrs. Ritter is based on Grandma Dallas.
Editorial Reviews

From the Publisher

It is the 1930s, and hard times have hit Harveyville, Kansas, where the crops are burning up, and there's not a job to be found. For Queenie Bean, a young farm wife, a highlight of each week is the gathering of the Persian Pickle Club, a group of local ladies dedicated to improving their minds, exchanging gossip, and putting their quilting skills to good use. When a new member of the club stirs up a dark secret, the women must band together to support and protect one another. In her magical, memorable novel, Sandra Dallas explores the ties that unite women through good times and bad.

Publishers Weekly

This entertaining second novel from the author of the well-received Buster Midnight's Cafe could be a sleeper. Set in Depression-era Kansas and made vivid with the narrator's humorous down-home voice, it's a story of loyalty and friendship in a women's quilting circle. Young farm wife Queenie Bean tells about the brief membership of a city girl named Rita, whose boredom with country living and aspirations to be an investigative reporter lead her to unearth secrets in the close-knit group, called the Persian Pickle Club after a coveted paisley print. Queenie's desire to win Rita's friendship (“We were chickens... and Rita was a hummingbird”) clashes with her loyalty to the Pickles when Rita tries to solve the murder of a member's husband, in the process unearthing complicated relationships among the women who meet each week to quilt and read aloud to each other. The result is a simple but endearing story that depicts small-town eccentricities with affection and adds dazzle with some late-breaking surprises. Dallas hits all the right notes, combining an authentic look at the social fabric of Depression-era life with a homespun suspense story. Film rights to Norman Twain Productions; Literary Guild alternate selection. (Oct.)

Library Journal

Hard times in Depression-era Harveyville, Kansas, are softened by the conviviality of a weekly quilting circle called the Persian Pickle Club. Queenie Bean, the "talkingest" member of the group, narrates the novel with snappy style. Over the course of a year, during which the club experiences more sorrow than sewing, Queenie and her pals depend on one another more than ever. When Queenie forms a fast friendship with the newest "Pickle," a flashy, big-city gal named Rita, the equilibrium of the group changes, for Rita is a novice newspaper reporter intent on making a name for herself. The story Rita most wants to crack involves the mysterious death of one of the club ladies' husbands. Will secrets long stitched into the collective fabric of friendship hold? This and other suspenseful questions of small-town life will entertain readers who enjoyed Fannie Flag's Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe (Random, 1987), Olive Ann Burn's Cold Sassy Tree (LJ 10/15/84), or Dallas's first novel, Buster Midnight's Cafe (LJ 4/15/90).Keddy Ann Outlaw, Harris Cty. P.L., Houston
Sandra Dallas Atchison

1939-

Also known as: Sandra Dallas Atchison, Sandra Dallas

Nationality: American
Entry updated: 10/01/2007

Birth Date: June 11, 1939
Place of Birth: Washington, District of Columbia, United States

Award(s):
Wrangler Award, National Cowboy Hall of Fame, 1980; named Exceptional Chronicler of Western History, Women's Library Association and Denver Public Library Friends Foundation, 1986; finalist, Western Writers of America Best Western Novel of 1998 for The Diary of Mattie Spenser; Spur Award for Best Western Novel, Western Writers of America, 2003, for The Chili Queen; Women Writing the West Willa Award, 2005, for New Mercies.


WRITINGS:

NONFICTION

- Vail, Pruett (Boulder, CO), 1969.
- Cherry Creek Gothic: Victorian Architecture in Denver, University of Oklahoma Press (Norman, OK), 1971.
- **Sacred Paint: Ned Jacob**, Fenn Galleries (Kansas City, MO), 1979.
- **Colorado Ghost Towns and Mining Camps**, with photographs by daughter Povy Kendal Atchison, University of Oklahoma Press (Norman, OK), 1985.
- **Colorado Homes**, with photographs by Dallas and daughter Povy Kendal Atchison, University of Oklahoma Press (Norman, OK), 1986.
- (Writings, artwork, and photographs) **Once Upon a Quilt: A Scrapbook of Quilting Past and Present**, edited by Margret Aldrich, Voyageur Press (Stillwater, MN), 2003.

**FICTION**


**Media Adaptations:** The Persian Pickle Club has been adapted for audio.

"Sidelights"

Sandra Dallas was called by Jane Smiley in Vogue, "a quintessential American voice." Dallas's nonfiction focuses on the history and architecture of the western United States. She writes about historic homes and hotels, ghost towns and mining camps, and cities like Denver and Vail. Her fiction, however, examines small-town America and the intricate relationships of the ordinary people who live there.

Dallas's first novel, **Buster Midnight's Café**, explores the background of a fictional movie star named Marion Street and her lover, a boxer named Buster Midnight, both of whom had been exposed in a Hollywood murder case. Effa, the narrator of the novel, attempts to balance published reports of the scandal against her own recollections of growing up with Buster and Marion in Butte, Montana, in the 1920s and 1930s. Effa speaks, according to Publishers Weekly reviewer Sybil S. Steinberg, "in a sharp and snappy voice that captures the reader's interest on the very first page." Steinberg praised the author for creating "a remarkable cluster of enduring friendships that ... accurately reflect the flavor of a small town."
The Persian Pickle Club represents "a colorful exploration of Depression-era Kansas and the meaning of friendship," wrote Suzanne Berne in the New York Times Book Review. Once a week, in a small town in rural Kansas, a group of farmers' wives gathers to sit and sew, share gossip, and trade scraps of cloth for their handmade quilts. The most treasured pieces of cloth contain a paisley pattern that the quilters call a "Persian pickle," and they have named their sewing circle the Persian Pickle Club. The communal work of quilting draws the women ever closer to one another, and the silence of their activity encourages conversation. Over long hours of stitching and storytelling, they develop bonds of friendship and loyalty that enable them to surmount the sorrows and hardships of country life during the Depression. The narrator of the tale is quilter Queenie Bean. Steinberg reported in Publishers Weekly that the novel is enlivened by "the narrator's humorous down-home voice," and Keddy Ann Outlaw wrote in Library Journal that Queenie "narrates the novel with snappy style." Berne complimented the author's "knack for capturing the quirky details of [the quilters'] lives."

The insularity of the circle is pierced by the arrival of Rita Ritter, a lively "city girl" from Denver, who has married a local farmer. Rita joins the club but, unsuited for a sedentary activity that nonetheless requires mechanical precision, patience, and dexterity, she searches for a more exciting form of entertainment. Rita decides to pursue her dream of becoming a newspaper reporter. News stories are scarce in Harveyville, Kansas, however, until a man's body is found buried in a local field. The man is identified as the missing husband of quilter Ella Crook, and Rita determines to solve the mystery of his death by probing the innermost secrets of the Persian Pickle Club. According to a critic for Kirkus Reviews, Rita "finds the wall of feminine loyalty unyielding." The same reviewer called The Persian Pickle Club "a tale of pioneer justice and impenetrable loyalty." Steinberg called it "a simple but endearing story that depicts small-town eccentricities with affection."

A reviewer for Kirkus Reviews commented that with The Diary of Mattie Spenser, as with The Persian Pickle Club, "Dallas has caught the lilt and drift of region speech" in this story set on the open plains of nineteenth-century Colorado. When, at the age of twenty-two, the sweet, simple, and plain protagonist, Mattie, is chosen by handsome Luke Spenser as his wife, she barely believes it. The couple leaves Iowa in a Conestoga wagon to homestead Luke's land in Colorado. Mattie records the journey and life after their arrival in her diary. The story that develops from her journaling describes how a despised "slattern" (a derogatory term for a promiscuous woman) ultimately becomes a devoted friend and an adored husband becomes a betrayer. GraceAnne DeCandido for Booklist called this a "ripping good read" and was caught up in the lives of the people living on the prairie, from building homes and rearing children to changing attitudes about society's outcasts. DeCandido noted that "the growth of Mattie as a person" unfolds in a setting of "what seems like genuine details of prairie life."

In Alice's Tulips, another innocent young woman is tossed into the harsh environment of farm life in Iowa. Set during the Civil War, the story finds the teenager, Alice--married for just one year--alone with a stern and formidable mother-in-law when her husband leaves to become a Union soldier. To ease her isolation, the hardships of working a farm, and the longing for her seven siblings, Alice begins writing long, gossipy letters to her
sister, Lizzie, and develops a talent and passion for quilting. The newly pregnant Alice hopes the baby will draw her mother-in-law closer to her. However, a reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* likened Alice to a Northern Scarlett O'Hara and observed that Alice is unschooled in dealing with people. For example, "She regularly boasts about her superior sewing skills, yearns aloud for fashionable clothing and speaks before she thinks. In other words, she is young and ignorant of the ways of the world." Her innocent flirtations with a Confederate sympathizer are taken by him as encouragement, and his determined pursuit tarnishes her reputation. Ultimately finding herself accused of murder, Alice finds help from unlikely sources. *Booklist* reviewer Margaret Flanagan commented that readers enjoy "this charming, homespun narrative" because it is "laced with plenty of whimsy, pathos, and intrigue."

Dallas offers a new spin on Westerns with *The Chili Queen*, in which a jilted mail-order bride, Emma Roby, turns bank robber and loveable con artist. *Booklist* reviewer Kaite Mediatore praised the "affection and zest" with which Dallas fills out the secondary characters in this novel, which is "sure to garner new fans and satisfy existing ones."

Further praise came from a *Kirkus Reviews* critic who found the novel "as satisfying as a John Ford movie, with just the right touches of humor and period detail." Likewise, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted: "The zesty, offbeat charm of life among these undesirables in the seedy West keeps this tale moving smartly."

Dallas sets her 2005 novel, *New Mercies*, in Mississippi in the 1930s. Nora Bondurant, now living in Colorado, has inherited her father's old family place, Avoca, and arrives to take possession. The house is filled with memories and perhaps ghosts, for it was the scene of the murder of her aunt and the suicide of the killer. As Nora begins to settle in, it is unclear if she will keep the place and become part of Southern society or sell it and return to Colorado. She increasingly is drawn into the mystery of her aunt's death and to the spell the house and her family's history casts over her. Reviewing the work in *Bookreporter.com*, Jennifer McCord wrote that the author is "a gifted writer who can make history come alive through her characters and their circumstances." Similarly, *Booklist* reviewer Mediatore termed *New Mercies* "a honey-and-Spanish-moss-tinged tale certain to please gentle fiction readers who don't mind a little mystery."

Dallas's 2007 novel, *Tallgrass*, deals with the internment of Japanese Americans in Colorado during World War II. As Dallas explained to *Bookreporter.com* contributor Alexis Burling, she had an initial decision to make about point of view: "Since I'm not Japanese, I couldn't tell the story from a Japanese point of view. That would have been presumptuous. Besides, *Tallgrass* is not so much about the Japanese experience as it is about the people living in the nearby town of Ellis, and how the camp affects them. So, the story is told from the viewpoint of a 13-year-old Caucasian girl. I wanted a narrator who was steeped in right and wrong, someone who did not yet understand that fear engenders prejudice and hatred, a young person with the courage to ask questions." The novel follows the changes wrought on the citizens of the nearby town by the arrival of the interned and the crisis which the brutal rape and murder of a young girl brings to the area. Burling found the resulting novel "a venerable blend of historical fact and engrossing fiction." Further praise came from *Booklist* contributor Allison Block, who felt Dallas "renders a dramatic (and surprisingly droll) coming-of-age tale in which ignorance breeds
malice, with brutal results " For Lesa M. Holstine, writing in Library Journal, the same work is a "strong, provocative novel [that] is a moving examination of prejudice and fear." And a reviewer for Publishers Weekly called Tallgrass a "special treat."

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- Vogue, April, 1990, Jane Smiley, review of Buster Midnight's Cafe, p. 278.

OTHER


Source: Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Gale Database: Contemporary Authors Online