[From Houghton Mifflin paperback]
For Discussion

1. What details of frontier life emerge from Molly Gloss's portrait of the Blue Mountain homsesteaders in the 1890s? What is the significance of the name Jump-Off Creek for Lydia and the earlier pioneer women with whom she feels kinship?
2. What has driven Lydia Sanderson to homestead on her own in the remote, sparsely populated Blue Mountains of Oregon? What is the significance of her statement to Blue Odell that "I was seeking the boundless possibilities that are said to live on the frontier"? What are some of these boundless possibilities, and do they change for Lydia?
3. In chapter four, we learn that Lydia "had a habit of going quick in these events, before the misgiving would set in." What instances are we shown of Lydia's "going quick" when confronted with difficulty or danger? In what ways does this habit serve her well, or not?
4. Lydia writes in her journal, "I am used to being Alone, in spirit if not body, and shall not be Lonely, as I have never been inclined that way." Yet Evelyn Walker, in chapter sixteen, reflects on her own loneliness and triggers a similar unspoken response from Lydia. How does Lydia deal with being alone?
5. In chapter twelve, Blue sees Lydia "hiding [a] little flash of satisfaction" when she brings down a calf for the first time. Why does this incident fill Lydia with such satisfaction? What other activities provide Lydia with a sense of satisfaction, reward, or pleasure?
6. How would you describe the reality of women's life on the northwestern frontier? How do Lydia, Evelyn Walker, and Doris Oberfield each cope with the challenges of living as a woman, single or married, on the frontier?
7. Every once in a while, Lydia feels "a sudden itchy need for sympathy, or for forgiveness," or just for some human interaction. In what ways does she deal with those needs? Does she fully appreciate the limitations of the life she has chosen?
8. Why do you think details of Lydia's past in Pennsylvania and her reasons for heading west begin to emerge nearly halfway through the novel, after we have already begun to form an impression of her? What details of Lydia's past help to explain her determination to go it alone, and eventually change our view of her?
9. As she is stitching up Blue's back, we read that Lydia "was tender, but pitiless, having never gained pity and so never learning it." What are some of the hardships endured by Lydia and the others that require both tenderness and an absence of pity?
10. What might be Tim's motives for suggesting marriage to Lydia, and Lydia's for saying no? What other indications are there that marriage is expected of Lydia and other women?
11. As cold nights return in October, Lydia admits that she "had no instinct yet for the weather in this country." How does Lydia prepare for the onset of winter? Are her preparations adequate?
12. One of Tim Whiteaker's infrequent aphorisms is "Carelessness is something that will get people killed." What does he mean by this? What instances are there of carelessness and of caregiving, and what are the consequences of each?

13. Lydia notes that Tim and Blue's house "looked well established and was soundly built." And Gloss adds, "She set a high value on those things." What are some other examples of what Lydia values?
14. In her first journal entry at Jump-Off Creek, Lydia writes, "I have not lost Heart, having done so in years past and no false hopes this time. There are Graces at all events." What are the "Graces" to which she refers? Which additional graces does she discover during the subsequent six months?
15. What impact does the wolf bounty have on the motivations and actions of the Blue Mountain homessteaders, trappers, and ranchers? What are its consequences?
16. What is "the quick, small grief" that Lydia unexpectedly feels when she learns that Evelyn Walker will go to her mother's to have her baby? Why does Lydia experience this grief, which she finds inexplicable?"
17. What are some of the ways in which the outside world encroaches on the inhabitants of the Blue Mountains?
18. How does The Jump-Off Creek change what you thought you knew about the West, men's and women's roles on the frontier, and homesteading at the turn of the century? What was the biggest surprise or challenge to a preconception you might have had about frontier homesteading?

Added by MG:

The Forest Service was established about ten years after the end of the novel, just at the beginning of a national change in attitudes and policies toward "wilderness." Lydia's homestead on the Jump-Off Creek would have been rightin the middle of what would become, by 1905, the Umatilla National Forest. People with homestead claims inside the boundaries of a new Forest were offered "in-lieu" sites outside the boundary, or government purchase of their land claims, but they might also choose to continue occupying their claim inside the National Forest. What decision do you think Lydia would have made about this choice? Go or stay? And if she went, where might she have decided to relocate?

From an interview in Talking Up A Storm: Voices of the New West, by Gregory L. Morris

GM: *Obviously, one of the things The Jump-Off Creek features is a strong, independent woman, Lydia Sanderson—windowed, and lucky to be so, forced as she was into a bad marriage, settling alone on an Oregon farmstead in the last decade of the nineteenth century, finding herself bound by social convention, even in the wilderness, and by an inescapable loneliness; and finally moving toward some sort of emotional involvement with a man, equally alone now. Was it necessary to kill of Blue Odell before Lydia could accept Tim Whiteaker as a man, and not just as another hard-pressed rancher? What kind of working-out of the male-female problem was at work in this novel? The reader notices how Lydia, even though a rancher, gathers with the women and wives at social gatherings in the region. How does she reconcile this sort of gender ambiguity?*

MG: I'm very familiar with the old Western plot necessity of killing off the faithful sidekick before the hero and heroine can get together. So it's interesting, and a little disturbing, that you see Lydia "accepting Tim as a man" after Blue's death. I certainly wanted to show them moving toward a deeper friendship—which I think was happening before Blue died—because I like Tim [as a character] and his loneliness just makes me ache for him, and makes Lydia ache for him. And I wanted to suggest, just slightly, Tim moving toward a more feminine ethic of sharing and generosity. I'm not sure if you inferred they would eventually become lovers. What I've found, is that about half the people who write to me or talk to me at book events, say they "hope Tim and Lydia get together" eventually. One person said, "I know they get together because I know what 'making hay' means and at the end they're making hay!" But about half want to thank me for letting Lydia keep her independence at the end. I'm happy with any of those resolutions. Blue's death was necessary, but not for getting out of the way of a romance between Lydia and Tim. I think it was just inevitable, given the slow aggravation of the conflict between Tim and the wolfers, the fated working out of the male story [of escalating violence].

As for Lydia associating herself with the women and wives rather than the ranchers, I don't think it would have occurred to Lydia to do otherwise. Women ranchers and homesteaders were much more common than is supposed—probably one in seven homestead claims was filed by a woman, and their rates of proving up were better than the men's. And women did much other men's work in the West, delivering the mails, hauling freight, and so forth. But in the diary evidence, you don't see many occasions of women including themselves in men's society just because they're doing men's work. Lydia, though she's taken up ranching, naturally feels more at ease in the company of other nonranching women than of ranching men. I imagine "gender ambiguity" might be something she wouldn't have recognized or considered.

GM: *One of the areas in which Lydia differs from the men in the novel, I think, is in her sexuality, which seems contained or perhaps absent. Both Tim and Blue are allowed their commerce with whores, but Lydia lacks any sort of sexual activity (at least any that is directly stated or described.) Yet there's clearly a sexual undercurrent to the novel. Do you see Lydia's celibacy as appropriate, acceptable, fair?*

MG: I had been reading Western novels since I was eleven or twelve, but the journals and memoirs I read for The Jump-Off Creek reported things I hadn't seen very often, if at all, in novels—plain hard work, and sickness, and tedious childcare, and grief, and loneliness, and poverty, and a necessary kind of "sudden" friendship. In their diaries, women liked to make lists of books they'd read, or music they'd learned to play, embroidery finished, recipes, prescriptions for dosing illness. They liked to write poems to their husbands or children, and long, sentimental prayers. They often wrote down their resolve to be braver, or stronger. What they didn't write about were bodily functions, sex, childbirth, birth control, menstruation, menopause. You can find occasional oblique references to these things, euphemisms for pregnancy for instance, but nowhere did I find a woman openly writing about her sexual experience. I meant to be true to that ethic, in keeping those references out of Lydia's journal. As for her celibacy, it's certainly appropriate, I think, given the moral climate of the times, and given that she had had what I imagine was a sexually unsatisfying marriage. The sexual tension is on the men's side. Lydia finds her celibacy both acceptable and fair.

GM: *Do you see, then, this novel as a "feminist novel of the West" and yourself as a "feminist novelist of the West"? Did you write the novel with any political intent, any political program in mind?*

MG: I wanted to write a Western novel with a woman holding up the center. Women's experience of the frontier hasn't been explored very much in fiction, and I wanted to do that because it hadn't been done very often. Once I was well started, I saw there were some things I was learning or discovering, and then the book became a working out of some of the different ways men and women confronted the frontier. But I never felt I had a political intent. I want to keep on doing that kind of exploring, if I can, because it interests me. But I don't really think good fiction springs from political programs.

GM: *You do some interesting things stylistically in this novel, also. For example, you include, sporadically, excerpts from Lydia's journal, supplementing the third person narrative with these direct, intimate insights from Lydia's consciousness. The journal, of course, was a common narrative form used by these westering women, but why the combining of forms? What sort of structural and thematic purposes did these entries serve? Were you ever tempted to let Lydia tell* all *of her story herself?*

MG: I had written more than half the novel before I decided to incorporate Lydia's diary entries into it. I'd been struggling with her, you know, she'd been a cardboard figure, almost a man-in-skirts. Well, I always take summers off from writing, to catch up reading, and clear the decks for the fall, and that summer, after getting about half down with the book and not thinking it was going very well, I spent three months pretty much just reading pioneering women's journals and memoirs. When I started writing again in September I wrote a diary for Lydia as a way to start defining her personality for myself. And from the first entry she wrote, on the day she was leaving La Grande to go up to the property she'd bought on the Jump-Off, she told me who she was, in the absolute clearest way. And her personality just seemed to grown organically out of the voice in the diary, and the circumstances I'd placed her in. I had to go back and write the whole book over from the beginning, actually, because now that I had a real

nineteenth-century woman in hand, I found other things had to be shifted around, adjusting to her. I had gotten together the elements of a traditional Western—a marauding grizzly, a cattle roundup, some bad guys rustling cattle. But when I set Lydia down in the middle of it, she skewed everything away from a genre Western storyline. It was her diary that always would see things unsentimentally, and she helped me see them that way too. But I just flat didn't want this to be entirely Lydia's story, nor told entirely in her voice. It's illuminating to see people from more than one viewpoint, and that's some of what I was after. Also I wanted to be writing a parallel men's story, Tim and Blue's story, which impinges on Lydia's story only at a few places. The men's story and the woman's define each other, I think, in ways that wouldn't have been possible if I'd stuck only to one.

End of the Oregon Trail Museum, Oregon City

https://historicoregoncity.org/

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https://historicoregoncity.org/historic-oregon-city-videos/

National Historic Oregon Trail Interpretive Center - Closed for Renovations
https://www.blm.gov/learn/interpretive-centers/national-historic-oregon-trail-interpretive-center

History and Educational Resources
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